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WRITING AS A LIBERATION PROCESS FROM COERCIVE OBEDIENCE: ASPECTS OF THE PROTAGONISTS' DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE FICTION

Master Thesis

Supervisor: prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, Csc.

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I declare that I worked independently on my Master Thesis “Writing as a Liberation Process from Coercive Obedience: Aspects of the Protagonists' Development in African-American Female Fiction” and that I included the complete list of used and cited literature, and other sources.

In Olomouc

Signature:

I would like to express my gratitude to the supervisor of my thesis, prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, Csc. for his help and guidance throughout the process of writing this work.

Contents

1 Introduction

Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gayl Jones represent some of the most influential (African) American (female) writers of the 20th and 21st centuries. I will focus on four novels by these authors; *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) by Morrison, the 1982 novel *The Color Purple* by Walker, and Jones' *Corregidora* first published in 1975.

As the topic suggests, I will be concerned with several aspects within the liberation process which the protagonists go through in order to free themselves from the coercive obedience. I will discuss every step at the journey of Pecola, Sula, Celie and Ursa toward the long-desired freedom. Every chapter will be further divided into smaller parts each of them dedicated to the particular protagonist and her attitude or experience with the discussed issue.

In the following chapter I will pay attention to the importance of voice and silence. Firstly, it will be crucial to focus on the type of narrative of each novel, considering the role of the protagonist in general, whether the protagonist is the narrator or not and what is the author's intention of doing so. Secondly, I will focus on the meaning of protagonists' decisions to either speak up for themselves or contrarily remain silenced. In each sub-chapter, I will consider the specific features that are crucial to the particular novel with respect to the protagonists' emancipation.

In the third chapter I will work with the concept of motherhood and the role of family legacy. I will approach this topic from two different perspectives; first, the protagonists' relationships with their own mothers, and second, their roles as mothers themselves. I will open the issue with Barbara Hill Collins' definition of black motherhood and the importance of mothers as models of female behavior for their daughters. As the analysis will show, the mother-daughter relation represent one of the key aspects of the protagonists' development process.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the concept of physical beauty and its connection to sexuality. I will compare how the protagonists, Pecola, Sula, Ursa and Celie, are regarded by their communities being constantly put down for either their appearance or sexual behavior. Another theme to be discussed is incest and sexual abuse they all experience to some extent. And lastly, how they deal with their sexuality and their lives in general after what they have gone through, and whether they

manage to overcome the prejudice or not. Closely connected to the topic of sexuality is the question of the position of black women in the (black) male world. It is important to realize that all the four stories are set in a highly patriotic, macho society, and so there is a corresponding relation between men and women. For that reason women occupy rather inferior positions, mainly taking care of children, households most often quietly without the possibility to express their opinions.

The last chapter will finally deal with the liberation from the prejudice. It will close-up all the previous aspects and summarize the development of every one of the protagonists, I will also consider the extent of their influence upon the environment, either positive or negative, how they change, or not, throughout their lives and whether they manage, or not, to break the chains of oppression.

1.1 Alice Walker and "Womanism"

Before moving to the following chapter, it is necessary to define and understand Alice Walker's term "womanism." Being a successful author, and also an enthusiastic and very determined equal rights activist and feminist, Walker introduced her term "womanism" in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, published in 1983. Alice Walker defines "womanism" in several ways:

> **Womanist**
>
> **1.** A black feminist or feminist of color. […] Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. […]
>
> **2.** Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women' s strength. […]
>
> **3.** Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*
>
> **4.** Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.[1]

1 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1984), xi-xii.

Alice Walker states the meaning of “womanism” very clearly. A womanist does not necessarily mean a woman is homosexual, but it stands on true and honest respect among all women, considering their sexuality, emotions or favorite activities. And so with this new concept celebrating womanhood, Alice Walker encouraged women to stand their ground and fight racism, as well as any sexual abuse that may come from (black) men.

2 The Importance of Voice and Silence

In the following chapter I will discuss in detail the role of voice and silence in all four novels. As suggested in the introduction, first, I would like to focus on the narrative technique analysis of each novel. Second, I shall discover the protagonists' personalities and all the influences which lead them sooner or later (or never) to stand up for themselves or, on the other hand, they maintain quiet and submissive.

However, before getting deeper into the analysis of voice and silence, there is one key aspect to discuss. The protagonists do not fight only the stereotypes assigned to women within the society, but they deal with other aspect of their being, that is blackness. And that is how we need to perceive Afro-American female fiction, from both these perspectives, gender and racial. In this respect, (Morrison's) novels must be viewed as political ones, as Madhu Dubey explains "the word *political* as used by a black woman writer in the 1970s may be interpreted in more than one sense, as referring to sexual and/or racial politics."[2] This does not apply only on Toni Morrison's work, and it is therefore important to keep the duality of the protagonists' sorrows. In other words, Celie, Ursa, Pecola and Sula are not silenced because they are women, or because they are black, but because they are black women.

2.1 *The Color Purple*

The Color Purple is a first person narrative novel written in epistolary form. First of all, the book consists of number of letters written by Celie, the protagonist, to God. And the second half of the work is composed of Celie and her sister Nettie's correspondence, although their communication is constantly thwarted by Celie's husband Albert. Nevertheless, the sisters' letter communication is crucial to the story and to Celie's self-development. In Hasan Boynukara words: "[*The Color Purple* is] a woman's narrative where a woman writes to another woman as a way of emancipating herself."[3] In *The Color Purple*, letters represent Celie's only tool of self-expression and understanding her own identity. And even though, Celie's writing and way of

2 Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelist and the National Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 34.

3 Hasan Boynuraka, Bülent Cercis Tanritanir, "Letter-Writing as Voice of Women in Doris Lessing's the *Golden Notebook* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," *Journal of Graduate School of Social Sciences* 15 Issue 1 (Jun 2011): 289.

expressing herself is poor at first, it gets more and more complex throughout the novel. Furthermore, the letter-writing technique seems very private and invites the reader to share the protagonist's most intimate thoughts and feelings. It basically gives the impression of reading someone's diary, and therefore, Celie cannot be taken for an objective narrator, her writing is very personal and sincere. Walid El Hamamsy explains the advantage of this close writer/reader relationship as follows:

> This intimacy attracts both the reader and the writer of the epistle. The reader feels privileged to be able to partake in the thoughts and feelings of the writer which are expressed to her/him and the fictional reader(s) alone. The letter writer, on the other hand, is given a chance to voice feelings and thoughts that s/he might not otherwise have been able to do due to social conventions and the nature of public discourse. [4]

Through the letters, the reader becomes a part of Celie's story and shares all the good and bad, all the burdens put on her and injustice she faces. In this hostile environment where her opinions and feelings do not matter, the letters serve as Celie's only voice and an alternative for speech. For most of the novel, Celie's letters represent her only way of communication through which she finally discovers her true self. “For Celie writing is just a substitution for speaking. She does not have any power neither in the society nor her family, thus she is led to loneliness and brokenness.”[5]

Another significant aspect of Celie's writing is the black English dialect she speaks (and writes) which also reveals her lack of education as she is taken out of school by her stepfather with an excuse that she is “too dumb to keep going to school,” and before marrying her off he warns Albert that “she tell lies.”[6] Celie's stepfather Alphonso, therefore, makes sure Celie stays ignorant and uneducated and on top of that untrustworthy. Alphonso's manipulation of Celie's schooling and trustworthiness only increases her submission and absolute absence of self-confidence.

Apart from the letter-writing technique, the role of voice and silence is another

4 Walid El Hamamsy, “Epistolary Memory: Revisiting Traumas in Women's Writing,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 30, Trauma and Memory (2010): 152.
5 Boznuraka, Tanritanir, “Letter-Writing as Voice of Women,” 284.
6 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Phoenix: Orion Books Ltd, 2004), 10-11.

important theme of *The Color Purple*. Celie is being silenced from the very beginning by the first sentence when her stepfather threatens her: “You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.”[7] From then on Celie is continuously oppressed by men in her life, firstly by her stepfather who repeatedly rapes her while his wife, Celie's mother is sick, and then by her husband, or better said master, Albert. Celie accepts silence and invisibility to be her tactic in order to survive. Throughout the novel, many characters, always woman characters, advise Celie to speak up, to fight for herself which takes her a very long time to manage. Up to that moment, they try to speak for her, “others act as her voice, for she has none.”[8] From the beginning, Celie must find the strength and courage to fight for basic rights.

King-Kok Cheung in her essay, aptly titled “Don't tell,” compares Celie's story to the Philomela myth. Philomela, a woman from Greek mythology, whose tongue was cut off after being raped by her brother in law, to prevent her from telling on him. And Cheung claims that “victimization incurs voicelessness.”[9] However, it is not only Celie, who is forbidden to communicate, as Albert swears to prevent Nettie and Celie from any correspondence and keeps his promise by hiding all Nettie's letters. With the first Nettie's letter Celie discovers why she never received any of them: “He said because of what I'd done I'd never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me.”[10]

Apart from the comparison to Philomela, Cheung contrasts Sofia and Celie's attitudes. Sofia, unlike Celie, definitely does not hold her tongue, neither within the patriarchal black community, nor among the whites, as she fearlessly answers to Miss Millie, the mayor's wife's offer to be her maid, “Hell no.”[11] Sofia ends up beaten up and put into jail. Cheung summarizes that “the black woman who dares to return insult and exchange blows is imprisoned, brutalized, and muted. The impudent tongue is bludgeoned-to seal her mouth.”[12]

Before her correspondence with Nettie, Celie's only listener is God. Sadly, this communication works only one way, and even though, God never answers her, Celie still believes in him. Despite of God's ignorance towards Celie, her faith is the only

7 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.
8 Boznuraka, Tanritanir, “Letter-Writing as Voice of Women,”284.
9 King-Kog Cheung, “'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in The Color Purple and The Woman Warrior,” *PMLA* 103, no. 2 (Mar., 1988): 163.
10 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 115.
11 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 81.
12 Cheung, “'Don't tell,'” 164.

thing she has for a long time and her believe in better life in heaven keeps her alive. And she says reassuring herself: “This life soon be over. Heaven last all ways.”[13]

Celie's faith in God, nevertheless, radically changes as she runs out of patience. In one of her letters to Nettie, Celie bursts out: “What God do for me? I ast. […] the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown.”[14] Celie's tough life and the way she has been treated by all men results in her proclaiming that God is not better than any other men. Her rejection of God is a logical outcome of Celie's hatred toward men.

Celie is afraid to speak up as a narrator as well as a human being and the only way of expressing herself is through the letters to God, later to her sister Nettie. Nevertheless, she gradually finds the courage to revolt against Mr._____ and the way he has been treating her.

The men in the novel have physical power over their women who, therefore, find themselves in a lower position within the patriarchal society, with the exception of Harpo and Sofia, who however, pays the price for her boldness and impudence. And even though Sofia's destiny serves as deterrent example which should keep Celie quiet. Celie overcomes her fear and finally decides she must speak up in order to reach emancipation.

2.2 *Corregidora*

Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora* is also written in a first person narrative. Although, the story is told by a blues singer Ursa, the main protagonist, she shares the narrations of four generations of the Corregidora women, as she retells the stories of her family, particularly her Great Gram and Gram whose traumatic experiences with the Brazilian slave-owner are constantly passed on firstly on Ursa's mother Irene and then on Ursa herself in order to keep the memory of the sad family history alive.

Ursa experiences both roles, the one of a listener when she learns the family history from her great grandmother and grandmother, and the one of a narrator who guides the reader through the lives of her ancestors and her own. The novel is thus full of Ursa's deepest psychological processes as she struggles with a decision between living

13 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 40.
14 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 172.

her own life freed from the past or carrying on the burden of responsibility to meet obligations of a Corregidora woman to “bear witness”

Unlike Celie, who is constantly muted by the men in her life, Ursa is permanently encouraged to remember, retell and relive the psychical and sexual abuse her great grandmother and grandmother experienced in Brazil in Corregidora's brothel. And even though all the official documents proving old man Corregidora's crimes and slave-ownership were destroyed, the Corregidora women decide that the injustice committed to them must not be forgotten but passed on by oral narration from one generation to another.

Joanne Lipson Freed analyzes *Corregidora* as a traumatic narrative. She claims the collective trauma shared by the four generations of the Corregidoras represents an important bond between past and present. According to Freed, by means of collective trauma, Ursa experiences the slavery and sexual abuse of her ancestors via listening to her Great Gram and Gram's stories again and again. “*It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger.”*[15]

Ursa recalls how Great Gram relives and re-experiences her trauma and frustration with every repetition of her story, but despite her suffering, she insists on keeping those memories alive. Freed explains that “Ursa's description of Great Gram's compulsion to narrate the traumatic past suggests that this repetition both alleviates her suffering (the words “helping her”) and perpetuates it (the words keeping her anger).”[16]

One of the most crucial aspects of Ursa's narration is the already mentioned concept of memory. It is the major aim of Corregidora women to remember and retell the family history of the old man Corregidora's oppression. The family memory is conserved through storytelling. As they share the ancestral story, together the Corregidoras create oral family tradition, which Ursa and her children are expected to continue further on. The dark side of this tradition is the negative effect this task of “leaving evidence” has on Ursa's life and her personal development. In her essay,

15 Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 11.
16 Joanne Lipson Freed, “Gendered Narratives of Trauma and Revision in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*,” *African American Review* 44.3 (Fall 2011): 418-419.

Sirene Harb claims that “with its polarization of past and present and its lack of ambivalence and paradoxes, the ancestral narrative does not leave any space for Ursa to explore her personal story, […] the legend told and retold by Great Gram is absorbed by Ursa, who repeats it without realizing its implications on her life […].”[17]

When listening to her Great Gram's narration, Ursa is never supposed to question the veracity of her stories, when she does at the age of five as it is hard for her to believe such terrors, her great grandmother reacts rather violently and slaps her face saying:

> *When I'm telling you something don't you ever ask if I'm lying. Because they didn't want to leave evidence of what they done – so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them.*[18]

This passage shows that the family puts pressure of “leaving evidence” on Ursa from a very young age, regardless the fact, she can hardly understand the matter of sexual abuse to such extent. And if little Ursa dares to ask about the great grandmother's story or has doubts about it, she receives physical punishment, just as Great Gram and Gram received from old Corregidora. At this point Ursa is too young to comprehend that she and her body will once serve as the evidence of old Corregidora's cruelty, just as the bodies of her female ancestors did.

An important feature of the novel is the vulgar language used by both men and women. Interestingly, the Corregidora women have acquired such language from the old man Corregidora and passed it on in their stories. Harb explains it as follows:

> Having completely integrated the coercive language used by Great Gram in her account of the brutal rapes she had been subjected to in Brazil, Ursa is obsessed by the insistence on continuity conveyed through the discourse of her ancestors,

17 Sirene Harb, “Memory, History, and Self-Reconstruction in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora,*” *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no.3 (Spring 2008): 120.
18 Jones, *Corregidora*, 14.

which is impersonal and full of repetitive refrains.[19]

Similarly, Rocío Cobo Piñero uses the musical, particularly jazz metaphor to describe Ursa's narration. She claims the statement "Ursa, you got to make generations"[20] to be a refrain which "is repeated throughout the text as Ursa retells, with variations, the history of her family by means of long improvisational *solos*."[21] Nevertheless, the metaphor of music goes even further, at the very beginning of the novel, Ursa undergoes a surgery after being pushed down the stairs by her husband Mutt and her womb must be taken out, preventing her forever from having children and passing on the tragic family history, just as every Corregidora is destined to do. And so because Ursa cannot have daughters on her own who would retell the story, she leaves evidence through composing her own songs which offer her the possibility to leave the family past behind and hopefully beginning her story anew. Singing and playing thus become Ursa's only way of expressing herself, even though the old man Corregidora's legacy remains hidden inside her music.

In her essay "'I Said Nothing,'"Jennifer Cognard-Black focuses on the role of silence in the novel, in comparison to the pressure to speak, and suggests that Ursa's hysterectomy at the very beginning of the novel, metaphorically initiates Ursa's silence and the loss prevents her from fulfilling the task passed on her by her maternal ancestors. Cognard-Black explains that "this loss is the both the result of forced silence (ie., Mutt punishing Ursa for singing the blues to others) and the circumstance that, in effect, keeps Ursa silent, keeps her from passing on her family's brutal history through succeeding generations."[22]

It is important to realize that the family history Ursa is determined to carry as the youngest (and last) Corregidora, is not part of her own memory as she never experienced old Corregidora's abuse, nevertheless, because of the constant influence and pressure from her family, Ursa unconsciously accepts the family legend as her own personal story. The still-living legacy of Corregidora's sexual and psychical abuse thus

19 Harb, "Memory, History, and Self-Reconstruction," 119.
20 Jones, *Corregidora*, 10.
21 Rocío Cobo Piñero, "All-Woman Jazz Bands and Gendered Beboppers: Gayl Jones ans Gloria Naylor's Jazz Fiction," *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, no. 19-2015 (2016): 19.
22 Jennifer Cognard-Black, "'I Said Nothing': The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," *NWSA Journal* 13, no.1 (Spring 2001): 42.

mirrors in all of Ursa's relationships with men. This traumatic burden to pass the family history is involuntarily laid on all the four Corregidora women, and it therefore plays a key role in creating their identity. Ursa is so forced to deal with the clash between the Corregidora past and her own present and future life.

2.3 *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison opens her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, surprisingly by describing the tragic event and its sad ending of Pecola being raped and impregnated by her father Cholly, and thus Morrison starts by revealing the very end of the novel. Her intention is clear, however, that is to build up reader's curiosity and desire to get deeper into the story. What the reader only suspects, is that s/he is about to become a part of a tragic story of a little girl, Pecola who only wants to be beautiful. And not only the reader becomes a part of it, s/he actually participates in Pecola's destruction, just as all the other characters do.

The narrative structure seems simple at the first sight, as the narrator is the nine-year old Claudia, however, some parts, are told from the perspective of adult Claudia, looking back and evaluating things she and her sister, Frieda, did not (and could not) understand as little girls. Michele Wallace explains that "her narration moves smoothly from childhood reminiscence to the occasional adult/editorial reflection of "the author," incorporating the pain and victimization of Pecola as a crucial factor in her need to be articulate, or to write."[23] Morrison thus sets off a series of interrelated life-stories which altogether create the complex narrative of *The Bluest Eye*.

The novel is divided into four major parts, Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer. Madhu Dubey sees Claudia's use of nature seasons as the metaphorical ground contrasting with the human culture. At last she explains that "this seeming correspondence between the natural and human realms is undermined by an equally strong emphasis on the disjunction between the two realms."[24]

The already mentioned human realm is represented by the Dick and Jane reader which serves as an agent of human culture, and contrasting frame to the cycles of

23 Michele Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 63.
24 Dubey, *Black Women Novelist and the National Aesthetic*, 41-42.

nature. Therefore, each seasonal chapter has its cultural counterparts which are always introduced by a corresponding part of the primer, to tell the story of the characters beside the MacTeer family. When filling in the gaps in the story which Claudia cannot narrate, Morrison reaches for the omniscient narrator who guides the reader through the story of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, Geraldine and Louis Junior, and Soaphead Church.

> Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend.[25]

The primer quotation serves as a kind of outline for the novel itself and an ironic comparison to the Breedloves, as the reader depicts a white family ideal the Breedloves can never reach By means of the Dick and Jane primer, Morrison tries to raise an image of a happy family; kind parents, obedient children, beautiful house, and of course not forgetting, a cat and a dog. Via this critical comparison, the author shows how dysfunctional Pecola's family is, in every socio-psychological respect, parenthood, childhood, friendship, and the matter of sexuality. And according to Dubey these primer phrases “provide an interpretative lens that directs the novel's focus toward racism as the primary source of oppression for black women.”[26]

Through many flashbacks, framed by the primer quotations, the reader learns about Pauline and Cholly's childhood traumas. The story of Pecola's mother Pauline is particularly interesting with respect to narration. Just as all the other Dick and Jane reader parts which are told in third person, the one concerned with mother, that is

25 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1999), 1.
26 Dubey, *Black Women Novelist and the National Aesthetic*, 34.

Pauline Breedlove, however, is the only one that alternates two types of narrators, omniscient and first person. Through Pauline's own voice we enter her mind and learn about her feelings, such as her love for Cholly at the beginning of their relationship.

When it comes to Pecola and her voice, it is rather simple. Pecola is clearly not the narrator of her own story, and she does not have the courage to defend herself verbally or physically. Throughout the novel, Pecola faces many situations when she can and should speak up or express her opinion but mostly she keeps quiet and submissive even when Frieda asks what *she* (Pecola) wishes to do. And she only answers: "I don't care. […] Anything you want."[27] Michele Wallace sadly concludes that Pecola is the ultimate victim destined to remain dehumanized, destroyed, silenced and as such she shall never recover. Wallace defines her "as a victim of incest," fatally affected by "her subsequent loss of the ability to communicate rationally."[28] Here, Wallace points out Pecola's madness by the end of the novel as her fictitious blue eyes are the only subject she insanely talks about.

In the last chapter, adult Claudia recalls Pecola's tragic ending. In this epiphany, Claudia realizes and finally admits how cruel and merciless they all were to little Pecola. Being aware of their ruthless behavior, Claudia switches narration to the collective "we," and thus speaks for the entire community and metaphorically confesses:

> This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late.[29]

27 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 18.
28 Wallace, "Variations on Negation," 63.
29 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 164.

2.4 *Sula*

Toni Morrison's second novel *Sula* is a rather specific one when it comes to both form and content. Morrison uses a third person narrative, however, as Axel Nissen suggests "*Sula* contains an unusual combination of omniscient and figural narration."[30] That means, Morrison offers a peek into the characters' subconscious, but always one at the time.

Unlike *The Bluest Eye* harsh opening, *Sula* begins with a four-page long prelude in which "Morrison establishes a tone that encourages the reader to view *Sula* as a parable."[31] The reader can thus expect a moral lesson by the end of the novel. Although, there is another reason to open the novel in such way. The prelude introduces the Bottom, its beginning and it also predicts its sad destruction. "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood."[32] This first sentence announces both the beginning of the story, and the irretrievable end of the Bottom as it is torn with the roots so to prevent it from ever growing back. Within this "entrance," Morrison intentionally does not mention any characters apart from Sula and Shadrack in order to give the reader a clue to whom to pay attention.

Still, it is not yet all that Morrison has hidden inside the first sentence. Her choice of plants, nightshade and blackberry, is not at all accidental. Firstly, they both consist of words connected to darkness; "night" and "black," but still they represent perfect opposites. "A familiar plant and an exotic one. A harmless one and a dangerous one."[33] As Morrison herself explains, these plants that coexist together, but yet are completely different, they serve as a metaphor to Nel and Sula's friendship and individual development of their nature. Nel is, therefore, given the characteristics of blackberry, as she is "nourishing, never needing to be tended or cultivated, once rooted and bearing," Sula, on the contrary takes the attributes associated with nightshade, she is "metaphysically black, improvisational, daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern,

30 Axel Nissen, "Form Matters: Toni Morrison's "Sula" and the Ethics of Narrative," *Contemporary Literature* 40, no.2 (Summer 1999): 270.
31 Maggie Galehouse, "'New World Woman': Toni Morrison's *Sula,*" *Papers on Language & Literatur*e 35, Issue 4 (September 1999): 343.
32 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (London: Vintage, 1998): 3.
33 Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (October 7, 1988): 152-153.

outlawed" and above all "dangerously female."[34]

Nightshade and blackberry, however, are not the only opposites Morrison works with. The reader is constantly exposed to a number of dichotomies, such as good/bad, black/white, male/female, virgin/whore, self/other, etc. However, McDowell argues that "the narrative insistently blurs and confuses these and other binary oppositions, blurs the boundaries they create."[35]

One of the reasons why the narrative might be confusing and the distinction of right and wrong seems so vague in *Sula*, is that Morrison gives a totally new meaning to the concept of the protagonist, as the title indicates Sula should be the major character, nevertheless, as Deborah E. McDowell points out, we get to know many and many characters before Sula even enters the story, and then goes on even after her death. Morrison, therefore, completely crushes the idea of a central character of the novel. But thanks to these multiple perspectives, the reader can share the thoughts of several characters. According to Nissen, there are "no fewer than six major focalizers or "reflectors" of the action – Shadrack, Helene, Nel, Eva, Sula, and Hannah – among whom Nel and Sula are quantitatively and qualitatively the most important."[36] The novel starts in 1919 with a description of the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio and the introduction of Shadrack's story. And even though, the novel goes chronologically from 1919 to 1965 and it witnesses Nel and Sula growing up and growing apart, many events are left out for the reader to think about, to wonder what might have happened, and what the author is not telling us. To this matter McDowell says that"the novel's fragmentary, episodic, elliptical quality helps to thwart textual unity, to prevent a totalized interpretation."[37]

Morrison offers an entrance into the characters' thoughts through psycho-narrations (both dissonant and consonant) which make it possible to access the characters' minds to some extent. Using Dorrit Cohn's definition of consonant psycho-narration, which the reader is more likely to find in *Sula*, there are "no gnomic present statements, no speculative or explanatory commentary, no distancing appellations, the

34 Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 153.
35 Deborah E. McDowell, "Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 60.
36 Nissen, "Form Matters," 271.
37 McDowell, "Boundaries," 68-69.

narrator avoids prominent analytic or conceptual terms, he is still reporting, with phrases denoting inner happenings."[38] Eva, Nel and Sula are most often given the space for psycho-narration, and so the reader learns about their feelings as they meet with several misfortunes. As one example for all, there is Eva's desperate situation but a strong will to take care of herself and her family after her husband BoyBoy left her, "Eva had $1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her, she needed money, and needed to get on with her life."[39] Nissen summarizes that the most convenient use of psycho-narrations is to describe such situations in which a character is lost in his/her own thoughts and feelings and does not know how to verbally express his/herself.[40]

In *Sula*, there is one more important situation when it comes to narration, that is a scene in "1937," as Nel finds out about the sexual relationship her husband Jude has with Sula. According to Galehouse, there are two crucial aspects to this event. First of all, the third person narrative shifts to the first person and becomes the voice of Nel, as "I." And secondly, this movement from the omniscient voice denies the access to Sula's mind and thus encourages the reader to sympathize with Nel.[41] Through Nel's first person narration and the revelation of Nel's feelings as she is reluctant to believe what she is seeing, comes close to the stream of consciousness technique:

> […] and when I opened the door they didn't even look for a minute and I thought the reason they are not looking up is because they are not doing that. So it's all right. I am just standing here. They are not doing that. I am just standing here, and seeing it, but they are not really doing it. But then they did look up. Or you did. You did, Jude.[42]

As already suggested above, it is rather incorrect to pronounce Sula to be the main protagonist of the novel. Meggie Galehouse points out that "the real reciprocity between Sula and Nel is the shared responsibility of serving as protagonist."[43]

38 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 31.
39 Morrison, *Sula*, 32.
40 Nissen, "Form Matters," 270.
41 Galehouse, "'New World Woman,'" 354.
42 Morrison, *Sula*, 105.
43 Galehouse, "'New World Woman,'" 351.

And as I already discussed, Sula and Nel coexist in mutual and complete opposites, Nel as the good girl always following the rules, Sula the evil one for whom the rules does not exist. Morrison leaves up to the reader to decide with whom to identify.

In conclusion, I would like to point out the significant role of the first sentences, especially in *The Color Purple*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. I will leave out Jones' *Corregidora* since its first sentence does not function as the novel's main theme.
As already discussed above, Alice Walker opens the story with an unconcealed threat: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy."[44] The power and urgency of Alphonso's statement, in the most negative kind of way, predicts Celie's destiny, and supposedly condemns her to silence for the rest of her life. The first sentence reveals the origin of Celie's submission. Not only Alphonso threatens her "not to tell nobody but God," as he is about to commit a horrible crime, but in fact he lays the blame of her mother's death on Celie, irrespective of Celie being just a child of fourteen by that time. Walker thus foretells Celie's mission to break the jail of silence she has been put into by her stepfather and kept in for years, and to find the voice buried deep inside her.

In both Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, the opening phrase serves as a herald to the events to come. Morrison herself pays a lot of attention to the first sentences of her novels in he essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken." It is then no accident that these openings sketch out the plot and theme of the novels one is about to read. In *The Bluest Eye*, if we skip the primer quotation already mentioned, the story begins in Autumn with adult Claudia reminiscing the unfortunate past events: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow."[45] Simple as it is, there is deep meaning hidden in this opening. Morrison explains the purpose of sharing the ending with the reader right at the beginning, for "it is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us. The conspiracy is both held and withheld, exposed and sustained."[46] By means of the opening phrase "Quiet as it's kept," Morrison invites us into the closed community of those who know Pecola's

44 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.
45 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 4.
46 Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 147.

tragic story, and thus makes us even more curious to find out what really happened, but at the same time she indicates the reader's participation in the story.

The first sentence of *Sula* was already discussed in more detail in terms of Sula and Nel's differences in personalities, however, there is more to it than that. According to Morrison's own words she wanted to “fashion a door” for the story and thus prepare the ground for the events to come, so that, unlike *The Bluest Eye*, the plot would not be completely uncovered on the first page.[47] Nevertheless, there is a prophecy peeping out of the entrance. “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood.”[48] At the first sight, we are only introduced to the setting of the city of Medallion. But looking at it closely, it already suggests its destruction. The plants, nightshade and blackberry, encourage the reader to focus on the opposites, later on represented by the characters Nel and Sula.

In the first chapter I have discussed the types of narratives of each and every one of the selected novels. Further on, I have analyzed the role of both the voice and silence which differ from one heroine to another. In *The Color Purple*, Celie must fight for her voice, the right to be heard and listened to and the accomplishment of her courage represents the climax of her self-development. Via the letter-writing technique, Walker allows the reader to enter Celie's mind, inner thoughts and feelings. The epistolarity represents Celie's key to liberation.

In *Corregidora*, Ursa is banned to be quiet from the very young age, and contrarily, she is forced to retell the family history and make sure to pass it on to the generations to come so that the injustice done to the Corregidora women will never be forgotten nor forgiven. But due to the hysterectomy, Ursa cannot fulfill her role as a mother and so continue to make generations, and so she chooses music to be her voice and she passes on the legacy of her female ancestors through singing and song-writing.

Although, the text of *The Bluest Eye* may seem simple at first, the narration is rather complex and precisely constructed. Morrison builds up the story upon two contrasting frames, nature, represented by the four main chapters Autumn, Winter, Spring and

47 Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” 151.
48 Morrison, *Sula*, 3.

Summer, and human culture, represented by the Dick and Jane primer, depicting the white family ideal which serves as an ironical contradiction to the poor, violent, dysfunctional Breedloves. Little Pecola, does not have any voice, neither as a narrator, nor as a human being. Her story is mainly told by her friend Claudia who shifts her narration from child to adult point of view. Besides Claudia, there is an omniscient narrator who takes over the passages which Claudia could not witness.

Lastly, *Sula,* narrated in the third person, works with up to six focalizers, namely Shadrack, Helene, Nel, Eva, Sula, and Hannah. Through these characters, the reader can access the story from many perspectives, although Nel and Sula's are logically the most frequent. Another important aspect of Sula is psycho-narration which opens the door to the characters' feeling and inner thoughts. Interestingly, Sula's position as a protagonist seems rather questionable, similarly to Pecola, she is not the narrator of the story, but in comparison to Pecola, Sula lives her life as she wishes regardless the community's convention or basic morals. For being free, too free, Sula pays the price.

Four novels by women about women, some of them strong, some of them weak, all of them challenged to find their identity and to fight self-hatred. Their voice, or silence, constitutes only one part of the mosaic of their complex personalities. Every action of rebellion brings them closer to liberation.

3 Motherhood and the Influence of Family Legacy

The mother-daughter bond represents one of the key topics not only in African-American literature and the motherhood theme undoubtedly lies in the very center of the four novels, *The Color Purple*, *Corregidora*, *The Blues Eye* and *Sula*. Undeniably, the family background one grows up in and the quality of family relationships one carries from his/her childhood widely influence one's identity, and further on his/hers approach towards parenthood. Motherhood has become a great theme among black female writers in order to celebrate or sometimes critically portray lives and work of black mothers. And so in my work, I would like to proceed to the concept of motherhood from two different perspectives. First, I will be concerned with the role of the protagonists' as daughters and with their relationship with mothers and what impact it has on the process of forming the protagonists' personalities. Secondly, I would like to focus on Celie, Ursa, Pecola and Sula as mothers, the circumstances under which they become mothers or if contrarily they choose not to become mothers at all and then what causes such decision.

Before starting with the analysis of the novels, I would like to first look at motherhood from African-American perspective and define the meaning of this concept in (Afro-)American culture. Patricia Hill Collins dedicates an entire essay to the meaning of motherhood where she distinguishes two images assigned to black women, at least from the Eurocentric perspective. The two images are rather contradictory, since on one side, there is the Mammy, the loyal, sweet and kind domestic servant who loves “her” white children endlessly, on the other side, there is the resolute, tough and too-strong matriarch.[49] This duality is greatly applied in *The Bluest Eye*, specifically in the character of Pauline Breedlove. But it is not only her who stands for the strong, sometimes insensitive mother role, as the mothers in the rest of the novels also are courageous women handling their households with firm hands.

Collins also emphasizes the mother-daughter relationship and in connection to this issue she mentions two theories in order to define the sex-role socialization of African-American girls and to comprehend the mother-daughter relationship. Firstly, the psychoanalytic theory “examines the role of parents in the establishment of

49 Patricia Hill Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships,” in *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers & Daughters*, ed. Patricia Hill Collins et al. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 44.

personality and social behavior, and argues that the development of feminine behavior results from the girls' identification with adult female role models."[50] In other words, the little girl emulates her mother's social behavior and accepts it as her model. Celie, Sula, Hannah and Eva, and even Nel and Helene, and the Corregidora women to some extent, they all may serve as exemplary representatives of the psychoanalytic theory.

And secondly, according to the social learning theory "the rewards and punishments attached to girls' childhood experiences are central in shaping women's sex-role behavior."[51] This theory suggests that the girls are most likely to copy their mother's behavior, when it comes to rewarding and/or punishing their children. To put it differently, the future mothers will apply similar educational methods as they adopted as little children.

It is important to consider these two approaches as complementary ones, not mutually exclusive, as they altogether examine two aspects of the (female) children social behavior acquirement. Additionally, these theories perfectly outline the content of this chapter on black motherhood.

3.1 *The Color Purple*

To analyze motherhood in *The Color Purple* is rather complicated. Celie's mother dies very early in the story and so the reader does not learn much about the relationship between Celie and her mother. Nevertheless, as the mother becomes very ill and refuses sex with her husband Alphonso, he repeatedly rapes Celie in order to fulfill his sexual needs. "Just say You gonna do what your mommy wouldn't," and as Celie cries from pain he adds: "You better shut up and git used to it."[52]

Although a sane and caring mother would never let any man to hurt her children, Celie's mother feels relieved that the sexual desires of her husband are no longer her business, Celie comments that "she happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long."[53]

Bell Hooks explains such unmotherly behavior by the bond between mother and father which is defined by her financial dependency on him, and so the mother-

50 Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture," 52.
51 Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture," 52.
52 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.
53 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.

daughter bond suffers of separation. Hooks claims that “mothers prove their allegiance to fathers by betraying daughters.”[54]

When Celie gets pregnant, her mother is already very sick, and dies “screaming and cussing” at Celie who because of her pregnancy “can't move fast enough.”[55] According to the psychoanalytic theory, the femaleness and feminine social behavior establishes by the girl's identification with her mother. Therefore, Celie believes her mother's life struggle predicts the same future for her. Subsequently, the social learning theory, also mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, claims that the way in which the girls are rewarded and punished forms their adult sex-role behavior.[56] However, Celie hardly ever receives any rewards, but because the “punishment” she gets from her family becomes her everyday bread, she accepts it as granted and normal even in marriage.

The applicability of these two approaches on Celie's social development, especially her female role in the society, explains why Celie endures psychical and sexual abuse for such a long time of her life. First of all, she only follows her mother's example of an oppressed sexual object, as the psychoanalytic theory suggests, and second of all, the physical harassment she experiences from her husband does not differ from the system of (rewards) and punishments Celie knows from her stepfather and therefore expects no better treatment. On top of that, as a result of her mother female role model, what Celie feels towards her mother is not (surprisingly) hatred, nor respect, but pity, and this consequently leads to Celie's own lack of self-respect.

It does not take long and Celie expects her second baby who is also taken away by Alphonso. And so at a very young age, before even becoming a woman, Celie becomes a mother whose children are brutally torn from her, one of them probably “kilt out in the woods,”[57] the other one, a baby boy sold to a childless couple.

After Celie being prevented from fulfilling her role as a biological mother to her own children, she accepts the role of mother, firstly for her sister Nettie, as she promises to take care of her, and she actually offers herself to Alphonso to save Nettie from being raped. Secondly, once Celie marries to Mr._____, she takes over all the responsibilities, the household, and his four spoiled children who do not know any parenthood

54 Bell Hooks, “Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 468.
55 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 4.
56 Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture,” 52.
57 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 4.

leadership. When Harpo breaks Celie's head open on her wedding day, Albert's only response is “Don't *do* that!”[58] Celie then must continue her work, as if nothing serious happened. This incident and Albert's reaction cause that the children recognize Celie's inferior position in the family and so they all treat her, as a domestic servant obliged to satisfy all their wishes and needs.

Celie's motherhood is not, however, destroyed. And even though she has (and loses) her children very young, Celie undoubtedly keeps her maternal feelings and intuition as she recognizes her baby daughter. “I think she mine. My heart say she mine.”[59] Celie's maternal instinct tells her the baby is her daughter Olivia, but she feels despair re-experiencing loss of her child, and simultaneously joy Olivia lives in a loving, well-off family. From then on, however, Celie does not know anything about her children's destiny for a long time, she can only believe they will be once reunited.

Two types of references to the African heritage can be found in *The Color Purple*. Firstly, there is the quilt-making inspired by art of African tribes, which serves as a metaphorical bond between the women in the novel. Secondly, Walker emphasizes the African legacy through Celie's children and her sister Nettie who temporarily live in Africa with their missionary family and thus directly discover their African roots. Walker refers to African-like quilt-making as a manner for the women to stick together and help each other out. Lei Sun explains that “the process that these three black women [Celie, Shug, and Sofia] assist one another to resist racial and patriarchal oppressions, assimilates to that of quilt-making.”[60]

Later in the novel, quilt-making has one more important function as Walker uses it, namely Olivia's baby dress which Celie made for her, as a proof of Olivia's (and therefore also Adam's) family past, legacy and identity. The moment when Nettie shows Corrine Olivia's old cloth, and thus convinces her of Celie being the birthmother, sadly, it is also the moment when Corrine looses the children and actually remembers meeting with Celie and that “she was so much like Olivia!” which made Corrine fear that “she'd want her back.”[61]

These passages demonstrate how crucial quilt-making is in terms of the African

58 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 14.
59 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 15.
60 Lei Sun, “Extolling Blackness: The African Culture in *The Color Purple*,” *English Language and Literature Studies* 7, no. 1 (2017): 14.
61 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 168.

legacy. In *The Color Purple*, Walker repeats this theme which she already discussed in her famous essay “In Search of our Mothers' Gardens,” where she points out that quilts might not only serve as a piece of art emphasizing black women's creativity, but also as a source of strong spirituality. Walker gives an example of a quilt made by an unknown black woman, “and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feelings.”[62]

Towards the end of the novel, we learn from one of Nettie's letters the true story of their mother and biological father, who was lynched by white men because of his business success. As a consequence of her husband murder, Celie's mother gradually grew insane, vainly waiting for him to come home.

After all miseries Celie has to face throughout her life, Walker finally gives her the fairy tale ending and after nearly forty years, Celie and her sister, and the children reunite again at the house where it all so sadly began.

3.2 *Corregidora*

Out of all the four novels, the concept of motherhood and the impact of family legacy are very strong themes in *Corregidora*, as they basically shape the entire story and the protagonist's personality. Ursa's identity development, as well as her mother's and grandmother's before her, is determined by maternal discourse, and in Ursa's case also by her hysterectomy which prevents her from continuing the family tradition.

When discussing the role of motherhood in Jones' *Corregidora*, there are two crucial factors to consider. Firstly, the extent of the impact the Corregidora maternal discourse has on Ursa's identity and her personal life, and secondly, the consequence of Ursa's disability to have children, yet these two circumstances go inevitably hand in hand.

As already explained in the chapter on voice and silence, Ursa's life is generally regulated and predestined by her Great Gram to have children and pass the evidence of the family history. But at last, they do not pass only the evidence of their oppression, but they load Ursa with a burden she should not carry, because in fact it is

62 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 239.

not her story. Yer, her maternal ancestors strongly believe Ursa represents another segment of the Corregidora chain, as a result they restrict Ursa's freedom to make decisions about her own life. Sadly, because of this necessity to pass on the tale of hatred, Ursa feels her only purpose is to keep the tradition. “She, like her mothers, is held captive by the raging memories of Corregidora.”[63] What Lilian Osaki suggests here is that Ursa has been enslaved by her family, constrained to live the life her ancestors have chosen for her, and Ursa herself realizes the extent of the family legacy which she cannot change. Ursa admits to herself: “I realized for the first time I had what all those women had. I'd always thought I was different. *Their* daughter, but somehow different. Maybe less Corregidora. [But then...] I knew I had it. What my mother and my mother's mother before her had.”[64] In this passage, Ursa comes to see that even though she hoped to differentiate from her ancestors, she can never deny the Corregidora blood in her.

Consequently, the burden of the family legacy convinced Ursa that having children not only identifies her as a woman, but it also defines her as a Corregidora woman which she now cannot fulfill due to her accident. Osaki claims that to be the reason why Ursa feels a less woman and that “she wonders how can she function as a woman without a womb? Ursa believes she cannot function as a woman because her mothers had told her she must have a child.”[65] Having been raised in such conditions, Ursa, and all the other Corregidoras, the mothers encourage their daughters to continue the stereotypes. Ursa convinces herself that with her womb she has also lost her womanhood, which according to her lies between her legs. And she blames Mutt for depriving her of womanhood and her baby: “It's your fault all my seeds are wounded forever.”[66]

In my opinion by means of such intense obsession with “bearing witness” of the Corregidora past, Ursa´s maternal ancestors apply similar psychical abuse (however, not sexual) on her, as the old man Corregidora practiced on them, and Ursa is unable to defend herself from their oppression. Just as Ifeona Fulani summarizes “Ursa's conflict arises from [her] mother's inability to imagine that [her] daughter might want

63 Lilian Osaki, “Redefining Motherhood in African American Neo-Slave Narratives: *Beloved, Dessa Rose*, and *Corregidora*”, *Ahfad Journal* 31, Issue 2 (December 2014): 34.
64 Jones, *Corregidora*, 60.
65 Osaki, “Redefining Motherhood,”34.
66 Jones, *Corregidora*, 45.

to live a life different from [hers] and from [her] mother's failing to allow [Ursa] to choose to do so."[67] Sadly, it is the tragic injury that sets Ursa free from the past and the oppressive family tradition. Ursa searches for liberation and self-controlled transformation, yet she still fully realizes her Corregidora background, but in music she finds her own way of self-expression.

Interestingly enough, at one point Ursa meditates on her hypothetical (though impossible) pregnancy, she comes to a severe conclusion, I believe a key conclusion in terms of maternal discourse and the legacy she was always meant to pass on. Ursa thinks for herself: "I can't make generations. And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby *had* come – what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like *her*, or *them*?"[68]

Clearly, there is a certain disagreement with her maternal ancestors, and even a slight sign of disapproval, almost criticism, of their approach as a totally wrong and unacceptable one. And so we might assume, as Ursa herself suggests, that even if she had a child and thus continued making generations, she might have chosen not to pass the evidence of the history of rape and incest on to her daughter.

Still Ursa struggles to find her true self, and since she cannot live up to her great grandmother's expectations and requirements, Ursa needs to create her own story and the right way of expressing it. Ursa's newly discovered identity develops through blues music, but still she wants to include some of her family history as well. Ursa thinks of her music: "I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life *and* theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song."[69] And so, Ursa finds her own way of expressing herself, all her pain, her sad story, and finally also the Corregidora legacy as she transfers all of it into her music.

3.3 *The Bluest Eye*

In Morrison's novels, the maternal figures are frequently powerful, but violent women. The concept of motherhood, thus goes hand in hand with aggression, physical abuse, and even murder. *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* depict maternity from many different

67 Ifeona Fulani, "Gender, Conflict, and Community in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32, no.2 (May 2011): 22.
68 Jones, *Corregidora*, 60.
69 Jones, *Corregidora*, 59.

perspectives. In *The Bluest Eye*, firstly, I would like to look at Pecola in the MacTeer family, as Mrs. MacTeer represent a so called “othermother,” secondly, I will consider the maternal approach of Pauline Breedlove and lastly, Pecola's pregnancy and its tragic ending.

Patricia Hill Collins in her essay “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture” mentions a certain type of cooperation among Black mothers and their mutual help with children in cases of emergency. Collins states there is “a notion of Black mothers as community othermothers for all Black Children traditionally allowed Black women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families.”[70]

This exactly applies in *The Bluest Eye*, when Cholly Breedlove burns the family house and so the children, Pecola and her brother Sammy, are taken care of by other mothers in the community. The MacTeers, parents of Claudia and Frieda, accept Pecola as a third daughter and they also treat her that way. When Pecola starts menstruating for the first time, the three girls get scared and try clean everything up and keep it a secret. The neighbor's girl, Rosemary, sees them, however, and tells on them to Mrs. MacTeer who does not hesitate to punish all three of them. As Claudia describes: “Mama looked at Pecola. 'You too! […] Child of mine or not!' She grabbed Pecola and spun her around”[71] Nevertheless, when she finds out what is really happening, Mrs. MacTeer washes Pecola and takes care of her as of her own daughter. Despite some Mrs. MacTeer's harsh, even violent acts, she still is the most loving maternal figure in the novel.

When it comes to maternity, Pauline Breedlove is a rather controversial character, and there are several factors to be considered. Interestingly, everybody in the family, Cholly, and the children Sammy and Pecola, they all call the mother Mrs. Breedlove. So in the Breedlove family they do not address each other with affection, but rather with cold aloofness.

Pauline's violence toward her family reflects all her life disappointments and unfulfilled wishes. From her childhood, she loved to have everything clean and perfectly arranged, dreaming of a handsome stranger and falling in love. However,

70 Collins, “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture,” 49.
71 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 22.

when Pauline and Cholly move to the North, she feels alone and unhappy, her life becomes nothing like she dreamed and so gradually begins to hate her home and family as she sees the origin of her misfortune in them. Pauline then finds her dreamy paradise in the Fisher family where she works as a domestic servant. The ideal luxury house only makes her "more and more neglect her house, her children, her man. […] Soon she stop[s] trying to keep her own house."[72] Disappointed by the reality of her life, Pauline concentrates all her positive emotions to the Fisher family and house. Evidently, for Pauline, the children symbolize the ultimate crash of her dreams and her love for Cholly.

And it is exactly in this house where one of the most striking incidents of the novel happens when Pecola, Claudia and Frieda visit Pauline at work, and Pecola accidentally drops a hot blueberry pie on the floor painfully burning her legs. The reaction of a loving and caring mother one would expect is an immediate concern for the child's health, however, that is not Pauline's case as she "with the back of her hand knock[s] [Pecola] to the floor" and then turns to the crying Fisher girl comforting her "'Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it.'"[73] It is worth noticing here that while at home everybody calls Pauline Mrs. Breedlove, the Fishers address her as Polly, and in return she displays more affectionate feelings toward them than her own family. Amanda Putnam explains that in this scene, Pauline "is out of sync with her maternal feelings, lushly nurturing the child of her employers, while physically abusing and neglecting her own daughter."[74]

Finally, there is the matter of Pecola's pregnancy and subsequent loss of her baby. Even after the rape, Pauline does not show any sign of sympathy for her sexually abused, physically and mentally broken daughter. On top of that, the gossip of Pecola being raped by Cholly quickly spreads across town and it is a widely shared opinion that it would be for the best if the baby died, and "be off in the ground."[75] The women even wonder that "the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself."[76] Sadly, Pecola is rejected by her family as well as the entire community, such environment

72 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 99.
73 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 84-85.
74 Amanda Putnam, "Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*," *Black Women, Gender, and Families* 5, no.2 (Fall 2011): 36.
75 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 149.
76 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 149.

leads her firstly to self-hatred, and then gradually into madness. She accepts the fact, there are no securities when it comes to love, family, friendship, or loving home to feel protected. According to Putnam, Morrison often creates "the home and immediate family relationships as places of potentially terrible pain."[77] Ironically, home is supposed to be a safe and comforting place where a child may hide from the cruelty of the outside world, however, the reality of *The Bluest Eye* differs greatly.

3.4 *Sula*

Sula is a very complex maternal narrative which depicts a wide scale of maternal love (and hate). Helene runs away from home and her mother's way of living, Nel's identity is thus uncompromisingly shaped by her mother's illusion of an ideal housewife, as "under [her] hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground."[78] Eva, the community matriarch, on the one hand is capable of killing her own son once she decides it is the best for him "to die like a man,"[79] on the other hand, when her daughter Hannah bursts into flames, Eva jumps out of the window to save her, and then, there is Sula, exposed too often to the presence of death and maternal extremes which consequently have a great impact on her.

All these examples demonstrate Amanda Putnam's suggestion that "most of Morrison's youthful characters learn about violence within a matrilineal home setting, when they are exposed to violence toward, and then from, their mothers and grandmothers."[80]

As already suggested, there are several types of approaches toward motherhood in *Sula*. The novel's complexity resides in the fact, we get to learn about three generations of the Peace women, and so we can track a number of similarities (and differences) between them. Yet, the motherhood in *Sula*, sadly works as a parallel to death.

Verbal expression of maternal feelings or any manifestation of love towards children seem unthinkable to both Eva and Hannah. There are two key moments in the

77 Putnam, "Mothering Violence," 36.
78 Morrison, *Sula*, 18.
79 Morrison, *Sula*, 72.
80 Putnam, "Mothering Violence," 26.

narrative when Hannah and Sula sense the uncertainty of maternal affection. Hannah once asks her mother: "'Mamma, did you ever love us?'" and Eva's response simply sounds: "'No. I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin'.'"[81] And then Eva tells many stories from Hannah and Plum's childhood that prove she really tried hard to take care of them, however, satisfying their physical needs and thus guaranteeing their survival represent the topmost testimony of Eva's maternal love.

Sula witnesses a similar situation, even though, she does not question her mother's love herself, but she overhears Hannah saying to her friends: "I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference."[82]

For Eva and Hannah, maternal love means to take care of the children's physical needs and that is where it ends. Patricia Hill Collins comments on such behavior that "Mothers may have ensured their daughters' physical survival at the high cost of their emotional destruction."[83] Hannah's confession represents a crucial moment as it consequently has a negative effect on Sula's social development which results in her becoming another generation of violent female. Putnam explains that "The pain Sula feels upon discovering her mother's opinion of her damages the young girl's self-concept, preparing Sula to become a violent and distant teenager and adult."[84]

Evidently, violence and death closely relate to the concepts of friendship and motherhood in *Sula*. Apart from the verbal violence just discussed, there are two tragic events in the Peace family, the death of Plum and Hannah. Firstly, Eva witnessing her son Plum destroyed by the war and his heroin addiction, she finds an atrocious solution and sets her son on fire. Later on, she tries to explain to Hannah that Plum "wanted to crawl back in my womb, […] I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more."[85] Eva justifies the murder of her son as "an intense need for self-protection."[86] Contrarily, when Hannah accidentally catches fire, Eva does everything she can to save her daughter, but sadly Hannah dies on a way to the hospital. The most striking part of this tragic event is Sula's attitude towards her burning mother, because Eva remains "convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was

81 Morrison, *Sula*, 67.
82 Morrison, *Sula*, 57.
83 Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture," 53.
84 Putnam, "Mothering Violence," 33.
85 Morrison, *Sula*, 71.
86 Marianne Hirsch, "Maternal Narratives: 'Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood,'" in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 421.

paralyzed, but because she was interested."[87] Here Eva recognizes the monstrosity of Sula's social apathy. But it is only a consequence of the family's heritage and the lack of social compassion that Sula adopts from Hannah and Eva. "Having learned from her mother the possibility of loving, but remaining remote, and having learned from her grandmother that murder may be a part of family life,"[88] Sula remains calm and emotionless, and curiously watches her mother burn alive.

Sula is very interesting and different from all the other protagonists and other characters. Unlike Celie, whose children are brutally separated from her, or Ursa who by means of a violent act cannot have children at all, and little Pecola whose baby dies before even being born, Sula voluntarily chooses not to become a mother, and not having children is actually an important part of her rebellious identity, regardless the community's conventions.

However, giving birth is strictly women's privilege, it is not a restriction or duty to do so. I think, Sula's refusal of maternity symbolizes a choice of a free, independent woman, since it is the woman's right to decide whether she wants to become a mother or not, irrespective the society's assumption the woman's body belongs to her husband. From this point of view, I see Sula as the real progressive woman of power who does not need to have a husband or babies in order to find her female identity. Marianne Hirsch concludes that "with characters like Sula, […], Morrison invents a female character who will not be maternal, but will try to get beyond an ideology that identifies woman with nurturing and caretaking."[89]

Despite some of the positive characteristics these mothers might have, I must speak out my disagreement when it comes to motherhood in these four novels. In my opinion, supported by the above analysis, neither one of the mothers, Celie's mother, Hannah, Eva, Helene, or Pauline, fulfill the role of a strong black mother always protecting their children from harm and the cruelty of the outside world. To a great extent, I believe, it stems from the hostile environment of the patriarchal society and their own life miseries that the women become cold-hearted, harsh mothers with no kind words for their children. The one exception I find among all these women is

87 Morrison, *Sula*,78.
88 Putnam, "Mothering Violence," 34.
89 Hirsch, "Maternal Narratives", 424.

Claudia and Frieda's mother, Mrs. MacTeer, although, she does not give no sugar to anybody, does not hesitate to get hold of a whip, and explicitly claims she would "rather raise pigs than some nasty girls. Least [she] can slaughter them."[90] Despite all these acts of violence she manages to create a safe home not only for her own daughters, but also for Pecola. And unlike the rest of the protagonists, who all are victims of sexual abuse, when MacTeer's roomer, Mr. Henry abuses Frieda, her father throws their old tricycle at this head and knocks him off the porch, and even shoots at him.[91] In terms of all the analyzed novels, I see this event as the only proof of true parental love, and the only appropriate reaction to an attempt of child sexual abuse. The only apology, or explanation to such maternal behavior is that it simply results in creating a chain of submissive and oppressed individuals. Even though we do not know very much about Celie's grandmother, or Pauline's mother, we can only assume they behaved in the same way and so passed their behavior on their daughters.

In this chapters, the analysis has proved the power and enormous influence the parents, not only mothers, may have, and do have, on their (female) children, sadly often in the most negative sense. The four novels introduce all types and approaches of motherhood, however, the protagonists not always have the freedom to choose theirs. And if they do choose, as Sula does, they are often judged as selfish, inferior and even less woman, for in these novels, it still holds true that a woman's purpose in this world is strictly defined by her ability to have children and her duty to fulfill this task.

On the other hand, Celie, Ursa or Pecola represent the other extreme since they are not given the right to make decisions concerning their own body and the surroundings involuntarily forces them into motherhood, either by rape, or by the obligation of keeping family legacy. But as demonstrated in this chapter, such oppressive treatment of women seldom has a happy ending, with the exception of Celie, who nevertheless has to wait more than thirty years for hers. Yet, Celie, Sula, and Ursa's approach to maternity, or their will to fight this convention moves them closer to liberation.

90 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 22.
91 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 77.

4 The Concept of Beauty in Connection to Sexuality

> A white minority of the world has spent centuries conning us into thinking that a white skin makes people superior – even though the only thing it really does is make them more subject to ultraviolet rays and to wrinkles. Male human beings have built whole cultures around the idea that penis-envy is "natural" to women – though having such an unprotected organ might be said to make men vulnerable, and the power to give birth makes womb-envy at least logical.[92]

This quote from Gloria Steinem's essay "If Men Could Menstruate – "perfectly describes my two major concerns of this chapter, what it means for the protagonists to be black and to be a woman. And so on the following pages, I will focus firstly, on the clash between white and black concepts of beauty, including the influence of white media, especially Hollywood, on the self-acceptance, or alternatively self-hatred of the protagonists. Secondly, how the heroines' appearance shapes their sexuality and their personal life. In *Corregidora*, *Sula*, and most importantly in *The Color Purple* I would like to open the topic of lesbianism, even though, *Corregidora* and *Sula* touch the theme slightly, *The Color Purple* could be established as a black lesbian manifesto. Consequently, my final concern within this chapter will be all kinds of sexual oppression, as I will further on analyze the sexual relationships in the four novels with a detailed concentration on sexual abuse and physical violence.

Many essays and books have been dedicated to the concept of black beauty, especially then how it is influenced by the white standards which have been accepted as most desired. The question to ask here is: How these white standards shape, and even mutilate black women's self-perception. In her essay on "Beauty Standards," Cynthia L. Robinson-Moore discusses in great detail the origins of white beauty standards and their impacts on black womanhood. Robinson-Moore claims that "beauty is socially constructed, yet standards appear normal when, in fact, they are used as a means of social control."[93] In other words, the white standards of visual

92 Gloria Steinem, "If Men Could Menstruate –," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology,* ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia H. Collins (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1994), 392.
93 Cynthia L. Robinson-Moore, "Black Standards Reflect Eurocentric Paradigms—So What? Skin Color, Identity, and Black Female Beauty," *Journal of Race & Policy* 4 Issue 1, (May 2008): 67.

beauty are only a social construct, which can, however, apply only when it is accepted by the majority of a social group. In such a case it may also dangerously serve as a tool of social oppression of a particular part of the group, just as it happens to black women among the white society who are therefore criticized for the disability to approach these white standards.

Nevertheless, as the analysis of Jones' *Corregidora* will reveal, even black females with lighter skin may not be protected from sexual abuse by their appearance. Robinson-Moore explains that “because dark is ugly and bad, while light is beautiful and good, lighter-skinned blacks are seen as intelligent, clean and nice, while “dumb and dirty” are stereotypically reserved for darker skinned people.”[94] This dual approach is perfectly demonstrated by Celie and Pecola on one side, and Ursa on the other. And so, as already suggested, my final concern in this chapter, therefore, will be the origin of the protagonists' sexuality, and their becoming objects of sexual abuse, despite their ever-reminded ugliness.

4.1 *The Color Purple*

Celie, as a semi-literate black Southern woman living in a black community, is deprived of the comparison to white beauty standards. However, she does not escape constant remarks on her ugliness from everyone in her vicinity. From her adolescence, Celie is continuously reminded of her unattractiveness, and because of this repeated humiliation, Celie not only realizes her ugliness, but she actually believes it to be true, and accepts it as her stigma. Ironically and despite her criticized appearance, Celie becomes a victim of sexual oppression, firstly, she is abused by her stepfather, later by her husband, Albert. The theme of sexual violence towards black women, either initiated by black or white men can be found in many works of African-American female writers and it is the case of all the four analyzed novels. However, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* uncovers a long-time taboo topic – lesbian relationship. An explicit homosexual relationship between two black women represents something scandalous within American literature, and according to Barbara Smith, Walker, along with Audre Lorde and Ann Allen Shockley, represents one of a few authors who have brought the

94 Robinson-Moore, “Black Standards,” 71.

topic of black lesbianism to the light.[95]

In *The Color Purple*, the protagonist, Celie, does not long for beauty as it is defined by white culture, but she finds a beauty ideal among black women, particularly charming but wild blues singer Shug Avery. Celie's admiration for Shug Avery starts when she finds her picture which falls out of Albert's pocket when he comes to negotiate about marriage. Celie is absolutely fascinated by Shug's beauty and she claims Shug is "the most beautiful woman [she] ever saw, [and] about ten thousand times more prettier then [her]."[96] Through this picture Celie acknowledges her ugliness which mirrors in Shug Avery's beauty. Later on, Celie attempts to look like Shug, in order to protect Nettie from Alphonso's sexual desire, Celie puts on "horsehair, feathers, and a pair of mammy high heel shoes," and then faces more of his cruelty and abuse when "he beat [her] for dressing trampy but he do it to [her] anyway.[97] Sadly, Celie's success in saving Nettie from being raped only means more sexual violence for herself.

Celie's protective behavior begins to bother Alphonso and he quickly discovers how to dispose of her. Therefore, when Mr._____ comes to ask to marry Nettie, Alphonso argues, wanting to get rid of Celie, she should get married first since she is the oldest one: "I can let you have Celie. She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work."[98] In this quote it is quite evident that Celie, as a woman, represents no more than a non-living thing, or at the best an animal without emotions or feelings, deprived of any right to decide about her own fate. One could think, the men are talking about a piece of cattle as if trying to agree on her value and the price which should be paid for it/her. Celie is shown and married off by her stepfather as if she were Alphonso's property, Mr._____, however, insists on getting a cow, as a bonus for marrying her. And thus, from an early age, Celie is used to hearing that she is an unattractive woman, good for nothing except work, but as a young girl, of nearly twenty, she does not know how to defend herself against such treatment.

Celie's suffering and sexual abuse continues also inside her marriage with Albert

95 Barbara Smith, "Sexual Oppression Unmasked," *Callaloo*, no. 22, Fiction: Special Issue (Autumn 1984):174.
96 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 8.
97 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 9.
98 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 9-10.

who literally uses Celie as a sexual object for his lust, as a domestic servant and a substitute mother for his unruly children. After such traumatic experiences, Celie's oppression and constant humiliation logically results in her despising and fearing men, even more so that Mr._____ continues to treat her in the same cruel and hateful manner as her stepfather before him. Smith in her article "Sexual Oppression Unmasked" describes this as Walker´s attempt to show "how little difference there is between the circumstances of an abused daughter and an abused wife."[99]

Apart from the frequent sexual abuse Celie is exposed to, she also experiences physical violence on a daily basis. When Harpo asks his father why he gives Celie beating, Albert answers: "Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn."[100] The only reasons given are therefore Celie's stubbornness and his alleged right to beat his wife. Bruce Kokopeli and George Lakey explain that "violence and sexuality combine to support masculinity as a character ideal. To love a woman is to have power over her and to treat her violently if need be."[101] According to Kokopeli and Lakey, violent behavior together with sexuality create the true essence of masculinity. Applied to *The Color Purple*, Albert, physically and sexually abusing Celie, only follows his masculine substance which gives him dominance of the inferior female, Celie.

Mr._____ passes on the same principles to Harpo who comes home complaining about Sofia's lack of obedience. When Harpo admits to his father that he never hits Sofia, Albert gives him a lesson claiming: "Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating."[102] Harpo, however, differs greatly from his father in terms of physical punishment, as he obviously disapproves of beating his wife, but on the other hand, he does not know any other solution, and when even Celie, for whom beating is an every day reality, advises him the same – beat Sofia, Harpo yields to their recommendation. It is the one and only occasion when Celie betrays another woman, but after that she is haunted by guilt which does not cease until Celie apologizes and confesses to Sophia she is jealous of her because of Sophia's strength to

99 Smith, "Sexual Oppression Unmasked," 171.
100 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 23.
101 Bruce Kokopeli, George Lakey, "More Power than We Want: Masculine Sexuality and Violence," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology,* ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia H. Collins (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1994), 451.
102 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 35.

revolt and fight.[103]

As already suggested, Celie's experience of physically mistreated and sexually abused victim leads her to introversion and precautionary fear of men, and she makes it clear from the very beginning that she takes no interest in men: “I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I’m not scared of them.”[104] In this part of the novel, Celie yet does not acknowledge her sexuality or sexual desire but apparently she carries on the fear of men along from her childhood. Overcoming the anxiety caused by men who control her life, Celie finds comfort, friendship and love among other women. King-Kok Cheung comments that “Celie gains strength from the woman she tries to vindicate,”[105] firstly Sophia, later on Shug Avery, and not forgetting Nettie. They all contribute to Celie's self-knowledge and transformation.

However, Celie does not refer to women in a (homo)sexual context, but she views them as allies in her sorrow who do not have any intentions to hurt her. In her essay Bell Hooks proposes that in *The Color Purple:*

> Patriarchy is exposed and denounced as a social structure supporting and condoning male domination of women, specifically represented as black male domination of black females, yet it does not influence and control sexual desire and sexual oppression.[106]

What Hooks suggests is that neither the patriarchal system, nor the individual men themselves can prevent black females from discovering and enjoying their sexuality. As much abused and oppressed as Celie is for years, she does find love through Shug and recovers via their relationship. However, Shug, as a strong, independent, and sexually unbounded woman, becomes Celie's mentor not only in the field of sex, but as Hooks suggests Shug “serves as a catalyst”[107] between Celie and Albert several times. Firstly, as Albert constantly reminds Celie of her unattractiveness and compares her to Shug's enchanting charm, Celie at last admits to Shug, Mr._____ often beats her for not being Shug. Hearing this, Shug promises not to leave Celie until she makes sure Albert will

103 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 39.
104 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 7.
105 Cheung, “'Don't tell,'” 167.
106 Hooks, “Writing the Subject,” 456.
107 Hooks, “Writing the Subject,” 457.

not lay his hand on her. Secondly, it is Albert and Celie's mutual love for Shug which finally leads them to reconciliation and new friendship.

Apart from this psychological role that Shug plays in Celie and Albert's relationship, which I will further develop in the following chapter, Shug is the crucial character when it comes to Celie's sexuality and self-acceptance. As already mentioned, Shug is Celie's long-time ideal of beauty and strength whom she longs to meet, even though their first encounter is far from idyllic.

Shug and Celie first meet when Albert brings Shug home as she is heavily ill and nobody else wants to take care of her. Celie trembles with excitement to finally see her long-admired idol in person, but then Celie learns Shug's evil behavior as she looks at Celie and declares: "You sure *is* ugly."[108] Shortly before becoming close friends, Shug joins the detractors of Celie's appearance and assures Celie of her bad looks. Gradually, however, their coldly-started relation grows into an intimate friendship and then lifetime romantic relationship. As they begin to confide to each other, Celie reveals to Shug her feelings and sorrows. Soon enough, Shug becomes a key figure in Celie's development process, especially in terms of recognition of sexuality.

Christopher Lewis explains that "Walker represents black women's sexual relationships with and tutelage of one another as an alternative to being subjected to masculinist and dominative ideas of sex." [109] It is especially true for Celie who finds lesbianism as the perfect alternative to the oppressive heterosexual relationship. In the arms of Shug Avery, Celie learns about sexual desire, but also self-respect. When Celie describes her intercourse with Albert who "just do his business, get off, go to sleep," Shug comments it sounds like "he going to the toilet on [her].[110] Having only such negative sexual experience, Shug summarizes that Celie is still a virgin, as she has never got to know sex as a pleasure, but only as an abuse, and thus she encourages her to immediately start discovering the secrets of her own body, and "the little button [that] git hotter and hotter and then it melt."[111] This scene when Celie, guided by Shug, searches and for the first time sees her clitoris, serves as the key moment of Celie's sexual story. Linda Abbandonato argues that the significance of Celie's discovery of her

108 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 44.
109 Christopher S. Lewis, "Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's '*The Color Purple*,'" *Rocky Mountain Review* Vol. 66, no.2 (Fall 2012): 162.
110 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 74.
111 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 74.

clitoris lies also in her realization that her sexual desires, finally revealed, can be fulfilled without a man, but more importantly with a woman.[112] Similarly, Molly Hite joins with a theory that Shug redefining the meaning of a "virgin" represents a threat to the established patriarchal system controlling women's bodies, since female orgasm does not depend on penetration, and thus it involves pure women's enjoyment.[113]

Nevertheless, Celie's initiation into sexuality and sexual practices represents the first step on her way to liberation from oppression and simultaneously Shug leads her further on to her complete transformation. In her essay "Reading the Raced and Sexed Body," Margaret Kamitsuka encourages to perceive that "Celie's lesbianism and the way that her discovery of her own sexuality is part and parcel of her discovery of a divine, living Spirit in the world"[114] As suggested by Kamitsuka, Celie's choice of sexual orientation has a significant resulting effect. Once Celie accepts the fact that she loves and is loved in return, she gradually builds the will to revolt and to make decisions about her own body and about her own life.

In this chapter, I have analyzed the process of Celie's sexual development and the significance of Celie's deeply intimate, and encouraging relationship with Shug Avery which so greatly helps strengthen her sexuality and self-consciousness. It is crucial to realize that the only affection Celie ever receives, comes from women; her sister Nettie and Harpo´s wife Sofia, however, with Shug Avery, for the first time in her life, she experiences what it feels like to be loved as a woman and a human being. Celie is constantly silenced in terms of sexuality, firstly, because of her fear as she only knows sex as the man's tool of violence and power over women, and secondly, Celie never speaks of her sexual desire because she never learned about her sexual identity, she never got to know her own body and its needs, until she met Shug Avery. However, as Charles Proudfit reminds, Walker received a strong critique for her explicit way of expressing lesbian love-making in the novel.[115]

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112 Linda Abbandonato, "'A View from 'Elsewhere': Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine's Story in *The Color Purple,*" *PMLA 106*, no. 5 (Oct., 1991): 1112.
113 Molly Hite, "Romance, Marginality, and Matrilineage: *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 441.
114 Margaret D. Kamitsuka, "Reading the Raced and Sexed Body in *The Color Purple*: Repatterning White Feminist and Womanist Theological Hermeneutics," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19, no. 2 (Falll 2003): 49.
115 Charles L. Proudfit, "Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,*" *Contemporary Literature 32*, no. 1 (Spring, 1991): 12-13.

There is, however, another reason for the society to defend heterosexual marriage and to silence self-sufficient women, according to Linda Abbandonato the concept of lesbianism is viewed by the majority as a threat to the established social system, as the women dangerously reveal their potential to become independent economical subjects,[116] which Celie achieves by opening her own prosperous business and by inheriting large property, such as land and house.

4.2 *Corregidora*

In *Corregidora*, female sexuality represents a key motif though which Ursa struggles to discover her identity. The concept of physical beauty, particularly Ursa's appearance strongly relates not only to her sexuality, but more importantly to others' perception of Ursa as a sexual threat. Ursa is a very attractive young mulatto woman with Portuguese blood who is assigned the color *red* by both, the women in the novel, and Caroline A. Streeter in her essay on racialized sexuality where she explains:

> In African-American communities *red* and *redbone* refer to skin and/or hair that are brown with reddish cast. […] When used to describe women, *red* and *redbone* indicate an assertive female sexuality which other women often object to or disapprove of.[117]

The local women in Ursa's hometown in Kentucky feel threatened by her *reddish* beauty which for them represents sexual aggression, and thus they fear that such an erotically charged woman will seduce their husbands. During her visit, Ursa faces many insults from the women who call her a “red-headed heifer,” and their prejudice makes them question Ursa's sexual behavior stating that “some new bitch from out of town going to be trying to take everybody's husband away from them.”[118] Ironically, Ursa's attractive appearance does not provide any privileges or kind treatment, contrarily to *The Bluest Eye*, for Ursa's beauty is her stigma as she represents a menace to the other

116 Abbandonato, "A View from 'Elsewhere,'" 1109-1110.
117 Caroline A. Streeter, “Was Your Mama Mulatto? Notes toward a Theory of Racialized Sexuality in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust,*” *Callaloo* 27, no.3 (Summer 2004): 771.
118 Jones, *Corregidora*, 73.

women who see her supposed sexual assertiveness as a dangerous competition.

Going back to the beginning of old Corregidora's sexual desire for his own female slaves, Robinson-Moore explains that

> color stratification evolved out of the institution of slavery in which Africans, having dark skin and deemed inferior, were enslaved and exploited. Along with slavery came the practice of sexual relations—both forcibly and voluntarily—between whites and blacks, and African women were used sexually for breeding.[119]

This very statement could be applied for the Corregidoras as Ursa recounts her great grandmother was an African woman with "coffee-bean skin, but the rest of us […] the mulatto women,"[120] descendents of old man Corregidora who "fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed."[121] For four generations, sexuality has connected with crucial aspects of the Corregidora women's lives. Firstly, considering old Corregidora constant sexual abuse Ursa's ancestors have suffered, their survival fundamentally depended on their sexual attractiveness for which he valued them. And secondly, after being freed from old Corregidora's oppression, by submitting to an obligatory generational sexual activity with the only aim being "making generations," the Corregidoras focused on fulfilling Great Gram's demand "to leave evidence" of the slave-master's crimes.

As already suggested, being a mulatto, Ursa is the only one of the four protagonists who is considered beautiful by her environment, and therefore, the one who could benefit from her physical appearance, instead, she is treated as a breeding instrument by her family, and as a sexual object by her husbands, Mutt and Tadpole. Throughout the novel, Jones builds up Ursa's relationships, and marriages with both, Mutt and Tadpole, on a master – slave principle. Ursa does not know sex in terms of pleasure, entertainment, or emotional connection to a loving partner, her experience widely influenced by the family history taught her that sex is either a male's weapon to possess and control women, or/and a device for conceiving generations.

119 Robinson-Moore, "Black Standards," 71.
120 Jones, *Corregidora*, 60.
121 Jones, *Corregidora*, 9.

During her first marriage, Ursa faces Mutt's uncontrolled jealousy and desire to "own" her body which results in a violent act with fatal consequences. The novel opens with Ursa and Mutt's fight over her performances at Happy's Café, as he cannot stand "those mens messing with [her]," he says they "mess with they eyes."[122] Before he (accidentally) pushes her down the stairs, Mutt explodes with jealousy. Deborah Horvitz comments that "he projects his own fears onto the other men in her audience, then blames her for attracting sexual attention."[123] Mutt longs to possess both, Ursa's body and mind, moreover, he rejects Ursa's economic independence which would ultimately deprive him of the status of a "master," and he claims he married her "so he could support [her]," despite Ursa's statement that she does not "sing to be supported."[124] Mutt, as a husband and a possessive man, does not understand, and does not want to, Ursa's passion for her job and for music in general, and so he feels empowered to make decisions regarding her life and profession.

However, it is not only her husband who controls Ursa's life, Ifeona Fulani reminds that Ursa more and more realizes that her body becomes a subject to two types of imperatives; patriarchal, represented by Mutt, Tadpole and metaphorically old man Corregidora, and also matriarchal, represented by her foremothers. Fulani goes even further and declares that

> Mutt's unwitting mimesis of old man Corregidora serves as a reminder, on the one hand, that colonialism is a highly empowered manifestation of patriarchy and, on the other, that the impact of patriarchal norms and controls in everyday life is to colonize women.[125]

Fulani suggests here that Mutt's character functions as a parallel to old man Corregidora's violent practices, and as a proof that the patriarchal system has the same impact and purpose nowadays as it used to have in the time of colonialism, that is to claim domination over women, and sustain the superior position, most frequently by

122 Jones, *Corregidora*, 3.
123 Deborah Horvitz, "Sadism Demands a Story": Oedipus, Feminism, and Sexuality in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina,*" *Contemporary Literature* 39, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 247.
124 Jones, *Corregidora*, 3.
125 Fulani, "Gender, Conflict, and Community," 12.

means of physical violence and sexual oppression.

Shortly after her injury, Ursa begins an affair with Tadpole, the owner of Happy's Café. What firstly seems as caring attention quickly turns into a slavery-like marriage, and with Tadpole as another despotic husband Ursa finds herself in the same severe situation as she was with Mutt. Nevertheless, when it comes to Ursa's sexual partners it is important to consider her inherited sexual trauma that makes it impossible for her to have a meaningful relationship with any man. The biggest question is whether the Corregidora women are even capable of love or whether they only consider sex as an unavoidable evil in order to conceive a daughter and "pass it on." Regarding Ursa's sexual experience, she never seems to receive pleasure from making love, everything happens rather automatically, even impassively. When she talks about sex, she often mentions pain that comes with it, and clearly she cannot imagine one without the other. This idea of unromantic sex and even less romantic relationship is very well demonstrated by the following conversation between Ursa and Tadpole:

> "'I love you,' he said.
> I said nothing. I was only thinking I'd only wanted him to love me without saying anything about it. […]
> 'I want you to be my wife.'
> I nodded, but he wasn't looking.
> 'Did you hear what I said?'
> 'Yes. I mean, yes I'll marry you.' […]
> 'Are you relaxed now?' he asked. […]
> Tadpole got between my legs."[126]

This quote represents the two significant features, mentioned above, firstly, it is Ursa's indifference to love. She does not want to hear about it, she does not want to talk about it, she does not want to say it out loud herself. Truly, I believe she does not know love or what it means based on the way she has been treated by men, either as a sexual object, or a beautiful thing to possess and control. As another reason for Ursa's ignorance of love I see her foremothers' insistence on hatred toward all men as the

126 Jones, *Corregidora*, 55.

initiators of all evil, embodied by sexual abuse and commodification. The whole scene of this absurd marriage proposal is extremely unromantic and strange, at first, it even looks like a misunderstanding, but then Ursa unsympathetically agrees to become Tadpole's wife. Secondly, the close up of this situation describes Ursa's indifferent approach to sex as she does not connect it to her own pleasure, but she more likely accepts it as an inevitable part of heterosexual relationship.

Later in the novel, Ursa finds out about Tadpole's affair with a young girl named Vivian. The following conversation results in denying Ursa's womanhood in terms of sexuality because of her incapability to have orgasm. Tadpole tells her: “You don't even *come* with me. You don't even know what to do with a *real* man. I bet you couldn't even come with him when you *had* something up in there.”[127] Clearly, Tadpole blames Ursa for their unsatisfying sex, accusing her of being a bad lover even before the hysterectomy, because he is “a *real* man,” the master, and she symbolizes a typical, passive female in the role of a slave. Ursa, however, tries to defend her position of Tadpole's wife and banishes Vivian from the room, fighting back by questioning his manhood: “How do you know you a *real* man […] if you had to leave me for somebody that ain't even a real woman yet.”[128] Ironically, what was once an object of Tadpole's affection for Ursa, he now insidiously uses as a weapon to hurt her, and by blaming her for her own sterility, he nearly destroys her concept of womanhood, encouraging her to doubt her sexual identity.

As already suggested, Ursa's husbands, Mutt and Tadpole, (unconsciously) share many characteristic features with old man Corregidora. They all represent strongly patriarchal values which they demand by means of sexual violence, possessive behavior, and vulgar degrading language. Both, Mutt and Tadpole use the same metaphorical language identical to old man Corregidora's when referring to Ursa's genitals as “a gold piece” or “a hole.” Elizabeth S. Goldberg argues that “Ursa's contemporary sexual relationships, this designation also circles back to the rape of Ursa's ancestral mothers, whose genitalia were similarly figured as empty vessels to be filled by men for profit and/or pleasure.”[129] Ursa's husbands therefore treat her neither

127 Jones, *Corregidora*, 88.
128 Jones, *Corregidora*,88-89.
129 Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, “Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*,” *Callaloo* 26, no. 2 (Spring, 2003): 452.

as a beloved wife, nor as a human being, and so they behave like slave-masters “using” her body as an erotic object to satisfy their sexual lust.

Apart from the abusive language, there is one more link that connects the Corregidora past and Ursa's presence, that is sex and pain as two inseparable instances of every heterosexual relationship. In her essay aptly titled “Sadism Demands a Story,” Horvitz considers the direct relation between sexual pleasure and physical pain always associated with it, as Ursa herself discovers they are “two humps on the same camel.”[130] At last, this revelation will finally lead to realization of her female power and consequently to liberation.

Similarly to Celie in *The Color Purple*, for Ursa too lesbianism appears to be a decent alternative to oppressive heterosexual relationships she has experienced. Nevertheless, Ursa does not have any sexual interest in women, and what more, she literally kicks Jeffy, a young girl, out of bed when she starts touching Ursa in her sleep: “[...] I felt her hands all over my breasts. She was feeling all on me up around my breasts. I shot awake and knocked her out on the floor. […] 'Naw, bitch, you get the hell out of here.'”[131] This unwelcome sexual experience is the only one Ursa shares with another woman, she even gives the impression of fearing lesbianism. Ursa rejecting a homosexual relationship may seems rather ironical, since it possibly creates a perfect opportunity for her to escape complicated and slavery-like relationship with men. Caroline Streeter argues that “Ursa's phobic reaction to lesbian desire can be understood in the context of the insecurity that being barren causes her to feel vis-à-vis her own sexuality.”[132] Ursa's resolute refusal of homosexual relationship leads her back to Tadpole's arms, and therefore heterosexual affair resulting in an unhappy marriage. *Corregidora* thus stands at the imaginary crossroad of rejecting homosexuality, however a logical option, and criticizing marriage as a slave-like institution taking control over female bodies and minds.

In conclusion, Jones works with strict binary oppositions throughout the novel, in Goldberg words defining “male as active, master, world-maker, owner of phallus and

130 Jones, *Corregidora*, 102.
131 Jones, *Corregidora*, 39.
132 Streeter, “Was Your Mama Mulatto?,” 781.

pleasure, and female as passive, slave, object whose world/pleasure is 'unmade.'"[133] Nevertheless, in the next, last chapter I will discuss Ursa's rejection of these established patriarchal restrictions, and her liberation from subordinate relationships through her music, and through her final realization of her identity and female sexual power.

4.3 *The Bluest Eyes*

Out of all the four novels, the theme of beauty and its negative impact on black females is strongest in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison based her novel on a personal experience, a conversation with her elementary school friend who desired to have blue eyes and Morrison vividly remembers feeling no pity but anger about such irrational, her race offending wish.[134] Thus, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison describes the fatal consequences of white-defined beauty on Pecola and Pauline. Evidently, it is not only little Pecola whose identity and consequently her self-hatred are completely crippled by her internalization with the unreachable white physical attractiveness based on the flawless appearance of Hollywood movie stars. Importantly, Claudia with her disdain for any white beauty representative, from the Shirley Temple cup, to white dolls and to mulatto girl Maureen Peal and little Fisher girl, Claudia stands as the absolute opposite to Pecola's obsession to have at least one element of the white ideal, the blue eyes.

First of all, it is important to realize that all the Breedloves share ugliness as a sign of recognition of the entire family. Morrison writes: "their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly."[135] Each of them learns to live with the family stigma in his/her specific way, Pauline uses her ugliness to turn herself into a martyr, Sammy uses it to fight, and Pecola hides behind hers, "concealed, veiled, eclipsed – peeping out from the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask."[136] Pecola, accustomed to this family curse, also adjusts her personality, accepts her ugliness, hoping to be invisible.

Next to the theme of physical appearance Morrison places the concept of in/visibility which repeats in the novel several times. Firstly, Pecola longs to disappear

133 Goldberg, "Living the Legacy," 455-456.
134 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 167.
135 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 28.
136 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 29.

during her parents' fight as she is scared, and helplessly covered under her sheet wishing:

> 'Please make me disappear.' […] Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left.[137]

In her despair, Pecola's desire to become invisible results in her complete "denial and erasure of her actual, physical body.[138] According to Walther, Pecola's imagination of her disappearance serves her as a protecting shield from a stressful, traumatic situation, such as experiencing physical violence between her parents.

Second example of Pecola's invisibility, however, is not initiated by her this time. She goes to Mr. Yacobowski's to buy Mary Jane candy but "he does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see."[139] Walther claims that because of the American culture's influence "one's visibility depends upon one's beauty," and so Pecola becomes unrecognized by those who acknowledge white standards of appearance.[140] Ironically, the blue eyes Pecola longs to have so much, represent visibility, and therefore, they cause one is seen and acknowledged by others, which sadly Pecola metaphorically achieves, however, under different and tragic circumstances, as she becomes visible and sexually desirable for Cholly.

Third event connected to Pecola's invisibility takes place in the Fisher's house where Pauline works as a domestic servant. As already mentioned in the chapter on motherhood, Pecola accidentally knocks over a pie, burns her legs, and makes a mess in Pauline's perfectly clean kitchen. In this scene, seriously injured Pecola becomes invisible to her own mother, who is rather busy with comforting the cute white girl

137 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 33.
138 Malin LaVon Walther, "Out of Sight: Toni Morrison's Revision of Beauty," *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no.4, Women Writers Issue (Winter, 1990): 778.
139 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 36.
140 Walther, "Out of Sight," 777.

than her “ugly” daughter.

With respect to the concept of beauty, I would like to distinguish three groups of female characters in *The Bluest Eye*, based on their internalization with the white beauty standards. Firstly, there are the mulatto females, Maureen and Geraldine, who among the entire black community, approach the white ideal the closest. Secondly, there are those who classify themselves to the category of ugliness, the community shares this categorization, and constantly reminds the females of their unattractiveness. Sadly, Pauline's and Pecola's low self-esteem proceeds from their strong internalization with the unreachable physical attractiveness defined by the glamorous film industry. The third group's most significant representative is Claudia who openly, and often aggressively fights against the white standards being set as ideals of beauty for black women.

The first group, namely Maureen and Geraldine, are considered by the community to be the “lucky” ones who possess physical beauty according to the scale of white-defined attractiveness. They even profit from their appearance; all the teachers love Maureen, all the black girls want to be friends with her, Geraldine and her family are among those who are better off, they are “colored people, […] neat and quiet,” unlike “niggers, [who are] dirty and loud.”[141] This proves Robinson-Moore's statement that dark skinned females are more likely to be socially rejected by both black men and women[142] which is perfectly demonstrated by Geraldine, who seeing little Pecola in her home, and the potential danger of Pecola's friendship with her precious son Junior, hysterically throws her out screaming: ”'Get out! You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.'”[143] Dark-skinned, ugly, and poor Pecola embodies an absolute social threat to Geraldine's perfect house and family, which automatically makes Pecola guilty of all the mess, and most importantly Geraldine's beloved cat's death. Geraldine's racist way of thinking does not allow her to consider her “colored” son to be a bully of this “dirty nigger” girl.

Pecola and her mother, Pauline, belong to a group of victims, who due to internalization of white beauty standards, develop very strong sense of self-hatred, and in Pauline case even rejection of her own family that does not meet her white

141 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 67.
142 Robinson-Moore, “Black Standards,” 72.
143 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 72.

ideals and expectations.

Claudia adopts the utmost negative, and even violent attitude towards everybody and everything that might try to question her black identity, and she continuously rejects all symbols of white beauty. Her rebellion starts with white dolls she breaks into body parts, and Shirley Temple cup, which Pecola loves and admires, then it applies also to girls who fulfill these white ideals. Nevertheless, toys, cups, or real girls, they all arouse hatred in Claudia and suppress her desire to look similar. Claudia tells us:

> It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls. […] I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. […] I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, […] I destroyed white baby dolls.[144]

By destroying the white icon, Claudia explicitly shows her resistance toward racial, gender and cultural categorization and strictly refuses to accept the socially constructed rules for her own. Trinna S. Frever comments that "this breaking open of the doll likewise opens the door for a range of subsequent literary and cultural depictions of identity and womanhood: complex, powerful, shifting, ambiguous, and beautiful."[145]

Claudia's hatred and annoyance with white dolls as representatives of perfect appearance and every girl's dream present, transfer also on all white, and/or mulatto girls. She also expresses her desire to dismember them, or at least torture them just as she did with the dolls. Claudia divulges that "the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls."[146] Claudia proves her attitude several times, for example, she

144 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 13-15.
145 Trinna S. Frever, "'Oh! You Beautiful Doll!': Icon, Image, and Culture in Works by Alvarez, Cisneros, and Morrison," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 28*, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 124.
146 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 15.

imagines the mulatto girl Maureen "fall[ing] off a cliff,"[147] or when during the pie incident in the Fisher's house, she describes how "the familiar violence rose in [her]" when the white girl calls Mrs. Breedlove "Polly" and for Claudia it seems as a "reason enough to scratch her."[148] Claudia despises Maureen, the little Fisher girl, Shirley Temple, and all the white ideals attributes, such as blonde hair and blue eyes, all these symbols of white beauty so much desired by Pecola.

The blue eyes and blonde hair are only two elements of the white standards Pecola and Pauline admire. According to bell hooks "racist aesthetics sees blonde hair as the epitome of beauty."[149] The film industry has created a fictitious scale of physical beauty at the top of which there is a perfectly stylish white woman, who for both Pauline and Pecola, represents the absolute beauty.

Pecola believes that her ugliness is the source of her misery and bad treatment, and so she wishes for blue eyes as a typical symbol of white-defined visual beauty, just as she knows from Shirley Temple, and Mary Jane candy. She is convinced that people around her would change their attitude toward her, they would be nice to her, they would be friends with her, they would actually see her.

In desperation Pecola visits a local pseudo-healer, and pedophile, known as Soaphead Church. She begs him to help her obtain blue eyes she so much wishes for. At first, he is filled with "anger that he [is] powerless to help her," since Pecola's wish seems as "the one most deserving fulfillment."[150] But then, he senses an opportunity to use Pecola for an evil act; killing the dog he cannot stand. Pecola watches the dog choke to death and struck by the horror of her action she runs away. Ruth Rosenberg claims that "the price [Pecola] pays for them [her blue eyes] is her sanity."[151] Pecola's imaginary blue eyes, and her experience of sexual abuse gradually lead her to madness.

As already suggested above, visibility brings one into the spotlight, sadly, Pecola receives Cholly's fatal, sexual attention. Obviously, Pecola is too young to comprehend the act of sexual intercourse, and the only image she has comes from hearing her

147 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 49.
148 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 84
149 bell hooks, *Black looks: Race and representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 68.
150 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 138.
151 Ruth Rosenberg, "Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in *The Bluest Eye,*" *Black American Literature Forum* 21, no. 4 (Winter, 1987): 441.

parents, since the Breedlove family shares one bedroom. Not having the faintest notion of love-making, Pecola believes these sounds to be love:

> Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed. He making sounds as though he were in pain, as though something had him by the throat and wouldn't let go. Terrible as his noises were, they were not nearly as bad as the no noise at all from her mother. It was as though she was not even there. Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence.[152]

Pecola does not now exactly what is going on, she only hears these "terrible noises," and considering the parents frequent and violent fights, she quite logically compares them to Cholly and Pauline's love-making. The Breedloves' marriage can be hardly viewed as a happy one and even though, they loved each other once, now their relationship brims with hatred and violence, and the children are often used as weapons, as already mentioned with reference to Pecola's desire to disappear.

In order to understand, but not to excuse Cholly's character, who always spends his time rather with a bottle of alcohol than his children, one must take into consideration all the frustration he has been through as a child, and also as an adolescent. Cholly never recognized familial love or responsibility, "abandoned in a junk heap by his mother," humiliated by white men during his first sex, "rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose, […] Cholly was free. Dangerously free."[153]

Before getting deeper into the analysis of the key event of the novel, the rape of Pecola, it is crucial to focus more closely on Cholly's first sexual experience with a black girl named Darlene which is suddenly interrupted by two white men with guns who force Cholly to finish the act for their entertainment. Cholly's masculinity is shaken and he turns his anger surprisingly towards Darlene. In connection to the rape of his own daughter, Madhu Dubey argues that "the presentation of Cholly as a victim of racial oppressions does partially displace his position as an agent of sexual oppression."[154]

Yet, Cholly's alternating positions as both, a victim and an oppressor, does not illustrate the only clash of contradictions. The act of rape itself is provoked by Cholly's

152 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 44.
153 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 125-126.
154 Dubey, *Black Women Novelist and the National Aesthetic*, 36.

mixed feelings. A simple movement of “creamy toe of her bare foot scratching a velvet leg”[155] overwhelms Choolly with desire for Pecola when she unconsciously copies Pauline's move, and so reminds him of the first time he saw her and he loses control: “The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals. […] He wanted to fuck her – tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold.”[156] Cholly and his memories of the past play a crucial role in this event, especially with respect to his confusion of violence and tenderness, a similar confusion that he felt with Darlene and the two white bullies. Even years later, now in the position of the raper, Cholly remembers his hatred not toward the white men, but toward all women whom he blames to be responsible for his unforgettable humiliation and emasculation. During this horrifying act, Pecola loses consciousness, and Cholly standing above her feels “again the hatred mixed with tenderness. [But] the hatred would not let him pick her up; the tenderness forced him to cover her.”[157]

Just as the origin, and the course of Cholly's rape of Pecola, similarly the consequences demonstrate a complex set of contradictions. As if being raped by her own father was not devastating enough, Pecola becomes pregnant and at the same time instead of receiving sympathy, she turns into a target of the community gossip dooming the baby to die. Sadly, Pecola's life is made of disappointment, hopelessness and unfulfilled dreams, and it ends before it even started. After she experiences a mental breakdown and becomes insane, Pecola spends her life with her abusive mother, isolated from the careless community, away from the gossip, devoted to her dream to have the bluest eyes, and left to her tragic destiny.

4.4 *Sula*

Just as *The Bluest Eye* is build on the theme of physical beauty, *Sula* stands on the motif of friendship, namely Nel and Sula's friendship based on their contradictions, physical and emotional. Sula, as already suggested in the previous chapters, is a very complex character and her attitude toward the concept of physical beauty and sexuality is no

155 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 128.
156 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 128.
157 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 129.

different. However, unlike Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*'s characters do not show such strong obsession with the white ideals. Still, I would argue, Morrison particularly creates her characters' appearance in such a way so that their physical characteristics reflect their mental and social qualities, and relevant personal nature. Consequently, I would like to come back once more to the opening of the novel and Morrison's usage of the plants as metaphors for the characters of Sula and Nel. Nevertheless, now, I will focus on the plants not only as metaphors of the girls' personalities, but also as mirrors of their physical appearance. The beginning of the story predicts that Sula and Nel differ greatly in their looks as well as their temperaments. Morrison uses nightshade as the reflection of Sula, and describes her "as quintessentially black, metaphysically black."[158] Sula's blackness, however, does not refer only to color of her skin, as I believe it reflects also her soul. And even though, Morrison herself reminds that nightshade is often "thought to counteract witchcraft,"[159] at the same time it delivers toxic and dangerous berries, and it is, therefore necessary to mind its life-threatening power.

Contrarily, the plant Morrison assigns to Nel, blackberry, is a "common, familiar and harmless," exactly like Nel, who, unlike Sula, subordinates her life to the rules and conventions "common" to everybody. The only features they share is blackness and their destiny to once be torn from their safe ground, whether it means Sula's dying or Nel loosing her husband, and most importantly her best friend. In the end, they are both "torn from their roots"[160] and as such they will never grow back again.

When it comes to the matter of Sula and Nel's physical appearance, we learn that, unlike Sula who is "heavy brown," Nel closely approaches the white ideals of beauty, because she has

> the color of wet sandpaper – just dark enough to escape the blows of the pitch-black truebloods and the contempt of old women who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures and knew that the origins of a mule and a mulatto were one and the same.[161]

158 Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 153.
159 Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 153.
160 Morrison, *Sula*, 3.
161 Morrison, *Sula*,52.

Interestingly, in this passage Nel's light color of skin balances on the edge of acceptability among the community's women who consider mulattoes as degradation of their race, contrarily to *The Bluest Eye*, whose community is obsessed with white standards of beauty, represented by blonde dolls, Shirley Temple cups and Mary Jane candy.

A crucial aspect of Sula's appearance is her birthmark. Morrison describes her as a girl with “large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose.”[162] Of course, there is a deep reason for Sula being marked, literally and metaphorically. Mae G. Henderson explains “hers [Sula's] is a mark of nativity – a biological rather than cultural inscription, appropriate in this instance because it functions to mark her as “naturally” inferior female within black community.”[163] What Henderson suggests here is that Sula is marked from the birth to become an outcast, and so is destined to marginality, however, her bad reputation and the gossips about her sexual life ironically shifts her right back to the center of everyone's attention.

But let's focus on the meaning of Sula's birthmark a little bit closer. Henderson further on suggests that in Eurocentric cultures, rose evokes mainly positive connotations, as it often symbolizes femaleness, beauty, and love both romantic and/or sexual. Later on, Jude recognizes a “copperhead” and “rattlesnake” in Sula's birthmark which, according to Henderson, refers to a serpent from the biblical Garden of Eden and the story of Eva's seduction. Henderson claims that “the association is significant in light of the subsequent seduction scene between Jude and Sula, for it is Jude's perception of the snake imaginary which structures his relationship with Sula.”[164]

Carolyn Jones even compares Sula's birthmark to the mark of Cain, and thus gives Sula's character a biblical dimension of a person forever stigmatized for his/her actions, destined to live as an outcast of the society. Although, I would argue that there is a significant difference between Sula and Cain, since Cain's mark serves as a punishment for his sins, unlike Sula, who is born marked, and thus deprived of the possibility to

162 Morrison, *Sula*, 52.
163 Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialetics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 127.
164 Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues,” 128.

chose between good and bad deeds, as she is already assigned the role of the stigmatized sinner, before even committing any crime. Finally, Jones summarizes that "Sula's mark is that of a self who absolutely unbounded and free. The mark as rose and snake signifies the beauty and danger of Sula's kind of freedom."[165]

According to Deborah E. McDowell, the multiplicity of Sula's birthmark's interpretations equates with "her figurative 'selves,' her multiple identity, depending on the viewer's perspective."[166] Some see the "stemmed rose", Jude sees the birthmark as "copperhead" and "rattlesnake," for Shadrack it represents a "tadpole," symbolizing Sula's development. However, one of the most interesting interpretations is the community's shared opinion that "it was not a stemmed rose, or a snake, it was Hannah's ashes marking her from the very beginning."[167] And so they establish Sula's birthmark as a clear proof of her evil nature.

Sula's controversial birthmark provides a perfect link to the question of her sexuality, Marianne Hirsch argues that Sula's birthmark is a "stemmed rose, ambiguously phallic and vaginal – a mark of plenitude that distinguishes her from other women, [168] although, Sula, with her reckless attitude to relationship only follows the example of her mother and grandmother, and enjoys occasional sex with both, black and white men. In Deborah McDowell's words: "Sula's female heritage is an unbroken line of 'manloving' women who exist as sexually-desiring subjects rather than as objects of male desire."[169] The love for all men is put forward as the Peace women's characteristics bequeathed by Eva, who "old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers."[170] Eva enjoys men's company and the pleasures of a body, and her daughter Hannah adopts this approach to sex and to men, who adore her free spirit and spontaneity. However, as much popularity and love-making as Hannah receives from men, she just as much faces hatred and gossip from the local women, who are afraid of having their husbands stolen, since Hannah does not hesitate, nor consequently regrets sleeping with her friends' spouses.

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165 Carolyn M. Jones, "*Sula* and *Beloved*: Images of Cain in the Novels of Toni Morrison," *in Toni Morrison's Sula (Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations)*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999), 147.
166 McDowell, "Boundaries," 61
167 Morrison, *Sula*, 114.
168 Hirsch, "Maternal Narratives", 422.
169 McDowell, "Boundaries," 62.
170 Morrison, *Sula*, 41.

Eva and Hannah's love for sex symbolizes their love for life, living according to their own rules and desires for whose achievement they have paid the price. Eva, as well as Hannah suffered to raise their children by themselves due to either being abandoned by their husband or becoming a widow. Nevertheless, both, Eva and Hannah learned to take care of their family without help of their men, and therefore they built a strong concept of selfhood and self-reliance, which is why they do not succumb to the community's conservative approach based on the patriarchal principles.

The example of Eva, and mainly Hannah "taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable."[171] This lecture on (female) sexuality which Sula undergoes during her childhood and early adolescence plays a crucial part in her sexual development. Adriana Rodriguez argues that "the fact that [Eva and Hannah] sustained fairly liberal heterosexual liaisons is particularly relevant to Sula's future sexual behavior."[172] The prediction of Sula carrying on the family tradition of "lovemaking" comes true when she return to Medallion and the evil gossip spreads quickly. Sula soon becomes known as the one who sleeps with men as often as she can.[173] Nevertheless, unlike her mother, Hannah who enjoys sex to the extent of physical pleasure, for Sula, according to McDowell, sexuality represents "an act of self-exploration that leads to self-intimacy."[174] During this process of searching for her true identity, Sula uses sex as a means of self-determination, especially the moment after love-making, Sula experiences "the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony."[175]

Sula's affair with Ajax starts on (Sula's) regular basis as she "pulled him into the pantry with a gesture com[ing] to Hannah's daughter naturally, […] and stood wide-legged against the wall and pulled from his track-lean hips all the pleasure her thighs could hold."[176] Despite this hasty beginning, their relationship is somehow different from the other sexual escapades Sula welcomes, even though calling it love might be exaggerated. However, Sula and Ajax share certain characteristics, Ajax too is known for his sexual adventures with many women, that bring them together and temporarily

171 Morrison, *Sula*, 44.
172 Adriana Jimenez Rodriguez, "Toni Morrison's *Sula*: Formation of the Self in Terms of Love-Death Relationships with Others and with Oneself," *Revista de Lenguas Modernas*, no.11 (2009): 14.
173 Morrison, *Sula*, 122.
174 McDowell, "Boundaries," 64.
175 Morrison, *Sula*, 123.
176 Morrison, *Sula*, 125.

makes them bond on a different, not only physical, level. As they spend more and more time together, Sula shortly adopts a wife-like manners, as she fixes her hair with a ribbon, cleans the house, sets the table for the two of them, and waits for him to come, unsuspecting Ajax's plan to leave her. Sula is confused by this "new and alien a feeling" of "possession, or at least the desire for it."[177] Within their intimate relationship, both Ajax and Sula find their true selves, and through the long conversations they experience a mutual connection, and understanding that is not overshadowed by any prescribed regulations. Neither of them ever mentions the matter of true love, as I believe, Sula's feelings for Ajax are the most genuine within all her short life, although, through the fault of her skepticism, Sula does not recognize the real nature of her emotions to the full extent. She only knows she misses his company wondering that "his absence was everywhere, stinging everything, […] when he was there he pulled everything toward him. Not only her eyes and all her senses but also inanimate things seemed to exist because of him, backdrops to his presence."[178]

Sula's disappointment of losing Ajax demonstrates only one of the sad consequences of Sula's reckless sexual behavior, as her short but revealed affair with Nel's husband, Jude causes the ultimate end of their friendship, and Nel and Jude's marriage. In connection to this event, Maggie Galehouse raises a question, the one asked probably by every reader of the novel: "'how could she do that to her best friend?'" but Galehouse immediately argues about the correctness of this question, and rejects it as wrong in its very essence, "because it assumes a moral universe in which Sula does not trade."[179] What is important here to realize about Sula is that she ignores any and all the restrictions coming from the outside, and so she does not have any sense of moral responsibility for sleeping with her best friend's husband, because for Sula, sex with Jude means only another insignificant sexual adventure.

Contrarily to Sula, and basically all the Peace women, Nel's womanhood and sexuality are defined by her husband Jude, and her commitment to her family. As McDowell explains: "Nel's sexuality is expressed in obedience to a system of ethical judgment and moral virtue, […] it is harnessed to and enacted only within the institutions that sanction sexuality for women – marriage and family – she does not

177 Morrison, *Sula*, 131.
178 Morrison, *Sula*, 134.
179 Galehouse, "'New World Woman,'" 342.

own it."[180] After discovering Jude's infidelity, Nel balances on the edge of helplessness and despair, not knowing what to do with her body without a husband, she believes that "for now her thighs [are] truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart."[181]

Several theorists point out the possible lesbian reading of the novel. Barbara Smith is among the first ones to discuss the lesbianism in Morrison's *Sula*, specifically in her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" published in 1978. Smith refers to Nel and Sula's passionate and intimate relationship at times of their childhood and adolescence as they begin to discover their sexuality and share their dreams of future lives. Smith focuses on a particular passage of 1922 describing the girls' deep interconnection and mutual sympathy because:

> it was in dreams that the two girls had first met, […] they had already made each other's acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams. They were solitary girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them. […] So when they [first] met, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends.[182]

Morrison's talent so poetically depict the girls' meeting makes the event sound like a beginning of a great romance. Smith comments that "it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel but because Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage and the family." [183] Nevertheless, as they grow, Nel yields to the social pressure and marries, unlike Sula who remains wildly free of the patriarchal restrictions. Yet, Nel's wedding followed by Sula's departure predicts the future split of their friendship.

Referring to another scene of the novel, Marianne Hirsch also suggests the possibility of lesbian reading of the novel, although to a lesser extent. Shortly before Chicken Little's death, Hirsch defines the girls' play in the grass as "a vaguely homoerotic moment of tenderness," which is, however, followed by "symbolic acting

180 McDowell, "Boundaries," 63.
181 Morrison, *Sula*, 110-111.
182 Morrison, *Sula*, 51-52.
183 Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *The Radical Teacher*, no 7 (March 1978): 23.

out of heterosexual play with sticks in the ground."[184] Through such plays, of both homo-, and heterosexual nature, Hirsch comments upon Nel and Sula's budding sexuality.

Despite the fact that there is no explicit homosexual relationship, or love scene in the novel, Barbara Smith concludes that "Sula is an exceedingly lesbian novel in the emotions expressed, in the definition of female character, and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality are portrayed."[185] In other words, Sula and Nel do not develop a homosexual relationship on a physical level, yet the depth and intensity of their friendship endures all the obstacles, sadly Nel comes to realize the true meaning of their bond long after Sula's death, as she feels "just circles and circles of sorrow."[186]

At last, as demonstrated by my analysis in this chapter, all the protagonists' position during the process of self-development, is determined, sooner or later, by their sexuality, as the male sexual power defines the females' status as sexual objects. In the following, last chapter, I will focus on their struggle and their un/success in breaking from the prejudices and at last reaching for their personal, sexual, social and economical freedom.

184 Hirsch, "Maternal Narratives", 423.
185 Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," 25.
186 Morrison, *Sula*,174.

5 Liberation from Prejudices

In the previous chapters I have discussed several aspects possessed, or not, by each protagonist, Celie, Ursa, Pecola and Sula which gradually contribute to the process of building up their determination supposedly leading to the liberation from coercive obedience. As already indicated by the foregoing analysis, only three out of the four protagonists manage to reach the long-desired freedom.

In this chapter, I will consider the consequences of all the above mentioned components; the protagonists' voice and silence, the mother-daughter bond and its influence on the protagonists' personality and self-development, and lastly the interconnection of the heroines' physical appearance and sexuality. Each of these aspects represents a significant part of the protagonists' identity, although every novel has a slightly different key theme, in *The Color Purple*, I suggest, it is the power of female bond, in *Corregidora*, liberation from the past and accepting Ursa's own (sexual) identity, *The Bluest Eye* shows how the curse of white beauty can destroy a young life, and finally in *Sula*, it is simply friendship. However, they all unify under one determining motif, and that is sexuality, and sexual oppression, because in all the four novels men's sexual objectification of females defines the women's position in the strictly patriarchal society.

In every previous chapter I have mentioned the male superior position, and dominance they tend to hold against and above their female counterparts. Kokopeli and Lakey in their essay “More Power than We Want” define patriarchy as “man having more power, both personally and politically, than women of the same rank.”[187] On the following pages, I will focus closely on the process of breaking free from the prejudice, and from the patriarchal control, although, not all the protagonists succeed to dispose of the chains of oppression.

5.1 *The Color Purple*

The Color Purple is a fairy tale-like story which begins with a young innocent girl who faces sexual and physical abuse firstly from her stepfather, then from her husband, and longs to survive, awaiting to enter heaven soon. Fortunately, Celie encounters some

187 Kokopeli, Lakey, “More Power than We Want,” 450.

strong and courageous women who guide her toward independence. Quite purposely, Deborah McDowell titles this novel as a story of "female bonding,"[188] because it is due to the female power and mutual support that Celie gradually gains strength to fight against the long-lasting oppression and humiliation.

When it comes to Celie and decades of suffering, one has to ask how it is possible for any human being (not only for a woman) to take such inhuman and degrading treatment for such a long time. In case of *The Color Purple*, the novel was so much worshiped after it was published that many literary critics refused to express any disagreement with it. However, as Trudier Harris correctly claims in her essay, there are two main problems with the novel. One of the problems Harris discusses in her work is dilemma she had to fight reading the novel, explicitly expressing her disagreement, or even anger with Celie's passivity. And one has to agree with Harris' question: "What sane black woman […] would sit around and take that crock of shit from all those folks?"[189] According to Harris other negative aspect of *The Color Purple* is that "the degradation, abuse, dehumanization is not only morally repulsive, but it invites the spectator readers to generalize about black people in the same negative ways that have gone on for centuries."[190] What Harris tries to say here is that representation of the black community and their internal relationships tend to revive the black, male and female stereotypes. Harris also summarizes that the only character who goes against all the stereotypes is Sofia, who nevertheless, must pay the price for her strength.

I found Harris' essay rather controversial, but yet the same could be said of *The Color Purple.* It would be foolish to criticize Walker for her novel, even more so awarded with the Pulitzer Prize, however, it is important to analyze her work objectively. And it is the same struggle Harris faces in her article. She realizes that it is almost unthinkable to criticize neither *The Color Purple* nor the author, for Walker is celebrated as a feminist, woman right activist and spokeswoman for the African-Americans, mostly for black women.

And so, there is the question of what causes Celie's long passivity and incapability

188 Deborah McDowell, "The Changing Same: Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 105.
189 Trudier Harris, "On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence," *Black American Literature Forum* 18, no.4 (Winter 1984): 155.
190 Harris, "On *The Color Purple*," 156.

to fight back toward the injustice she is constantly put through. I came up with only one explanation. I believe anyone, man or woman, black or white, who is repeatedly abused, physically and psychically, who is continuously put down by his/her family, by people who are supposed to love him/her unconditionally, such person's soul and self-consciousness are destroyed by this treatment. And so, I think, that is the reason it lasts for decades for Celie not only to fight back, but actually to learn how to fight for herself. It is even harder because she first of all must find her true identity and realize she deserves better life since she grows up believing she is ugly, stupid and unworthy of love.

In my opinion, Celie gradually achieves liberation on three levels as she undergoes a complex transformation with respect to religion, male/sexual oppression, and economic independence. She overcomes Albert's insult, “poor, ugly, woman” but all these levels are deeply interconnected and Shug is Celie's ultimate guide and mentor in all the three areas. She teaches her to acknowledge and accept her own body and sexuality, she explains the lesbian relationship is not wrong because it was God's intention, which proves Walker's revolutionary approach as she links sex, homosexual love and faith. Shug also encourages Celie to start her own business and persuades her to approve of her mother's last will and thus she becomes an owner of a house and all its belonging property. The economic independence then closes up the entire circle of Celie's breaking from prejudice and achieving a complete freedom on all the mentioned levels.

Firstly, all the authorities Celie is forced to acknowledge are men, therefore her childhood, her adult life, and even her faith is dominated by male figures. From the beginning she equates God with her stepfather, as she refers to Alphonso as “He” with the capital letter, and later she address her husband as Mr._____, because she fears him as someone almighty who has power over her. Linda Abbandonato argues that God, Alphonso, and Albert, together represent “an unholy [male] trinity of power” that controls Celie's life.[191] Due to Celie's endless struggles, she arrives at the conclusion that God “act like all the other mens,”[192] and for that reason no good, and no help can be expected from him. Similarly to Celie's initiation into sexuality, it is Shug again who

191 Abbandonato, "'A View from 'Elsewhere,'" 1113.
192 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 172.

guides Celie to reconciliation with God, as she dissuades Celie from rejecting Him. However, Shug does question God as a stereotypical old, white man, and she explains to Celie that "God is everything. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It."[193] This desexualization of God is an important part of Celie's transformation, Bell Hooks argues that "Shug initiates Celie into a spiritual awakening wherein belief of God as white male authority figure, who gives orders and punishes, is supplanted by the vision of a loving God who wants believer to celebrate life, to experience pleasure."[194] With the help of Shug Avery, Celie acknowledges this new God who supports their relationship because He "love all them feelings."[195]

Once Celie accepts a sexless, compassionate God approving of her love for Shug, she moves a step closer to her overall freedom by reaching the liberation on the religious level. She demonstrates her spiritual peace and balance by addressing her last letter, "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God."[196] This proves that Celie comes to believe in God's presence in everything, nature, people, feelings, and finally even herself. She believes, God blesses her with love and happiness which she truly deserves.

The second breaking point appears during a big family dinner when Shug announces that Celie moves to Memphis with her. After decades of oppression, Celie finally discovers the strength and most importantly the voice to speak up for herself, and once she calls Albert "a lowdown dog," her voice cannot be silenced again, even though, Albert continues to put her down.

> You'll be back, he say. Nothing up North for nobody like you. Shug got talent, he say. She can sing. She got spunk, he say. She can talk to anybody. Shug got looks, he say. She can stand up and be notice. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug's maid. […] And nobody crazy or backward enough to want to marry you, neither.[197]

193 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 175.
194 Hooks, "Writing the Subject," 460.
195 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 175.
196 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 252.
197 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 183.

Nevertheless, Celie is not afraid of him anymore and pays him back for his mistreatment by pronouncing a curse: “I curse you, I say. Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot.”[198] Albert laughs at Celie trying to humiliate her for the last time: “You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, you nothing at all.”[199] At last, Albert's words have no effect, or better said, they have the opposite effect than he planned as his insults become the ultimate impulse for Celie to leave and start her own life. According to King-Kok Cheung, Celie “transforms herself from a victim to a victor by throwing angry words back at her voluble oppressors.”[200] Not only, Albert's offenses encourage Celie in her rebellion, but at the same time Celie's curse soon turns into Albert's tragic reality, which however, becomes a breeding ground for his own transformation.

By finding her voice and directly confronting Albert, Celie extricates herself from male, and sexual oppression, simultaneously deposing him from the superior patriarchal position, and thus she achieves liberation on the second mentioned level. At last, she confirms her newly found identity by turning Albert's insult into the anthem of self-realization, Celie embraces her true self by proudly proclaiming: “'I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly. But I'm here.'“[201] In this scene, Celie transforms herself by means of self-expression from being a submissive object of male's sexual desire and coercive power, to a courageous self-defined woman in control of her own faith.

Third aspect of Celie's emancipation is economic independence that she gains due to two crucial events; starting her own successful business, and inheriting her parents' house with lands. These two significant changes not only provide Celie with financial security, but they also strengthen her self-confidence and self-sufficiency as a well-rounded individual. Similarly to the previous development phases, even now Shug proves herself again as a loving, supporting partner and a key participant within Celie's transformational process. Firstly, she encourages Celie to make her own living with sewing pants, and secondly, she persuades her to accept the inheritance, exulting:

198 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 184.
199 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 184.
200 Cheung, “'Don't tell,'” 168.
201 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 184.

“You making your living, Celie. Girl, you on your way.”[202]

Apart from the economic independence itself, there are more slightly hidden meanings connected to this matter. Firstly, the establishment of her own company considerably contributes to Celie's determination of her own identity, as for the very first time, she does not only finish her letter for Nettie with “Amen,” but she actually signs it:

Your Sister, Celie
Folkspants, Unlimited.
Sugar Avery Drive
Memphis, Tennessee[203]

Celie completes her self-development by officially declaring her job, and her successful business as an inseparable part of her newly discovered identity.

Secondly, by designing pants in unisex style represents Celie's major inner change which leads her to sociocultural and gender reconsideration of male and female roles. Lauren Berlant informs that “Folkspants” as “marketed for all genders, the uni-sexuality of the pants deemphasizes the importance of fashion in the social context in which the pants are worn.”[204] Through her work, Celie expresses her disapproval of the current male-dominated social hierarchy, and therefore she designs cloths which perfectly suits men and women, and offers comfort and great scale of colors regardless the gender restrictions.

Despite Albert's insult that she is “poor, black, ugly, and a woman” who is good for nothing except to “be Shug's maid,” Celie manages to overcome all her alleged stigmas, and she proudly declares: “I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time.”[205] At last, Albert's words that destined Celie to failure convert into her great triumph, and vice versa Celie's curse becomes Albert's cruel reality, as he struggles alone in his house being totally helpless without a woman, truly the jail he planned for Celie is the one he rots in now.

202 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 190.
203 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 190.
204 Lauren Berlant, “Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*,” *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 4 (Summer, 1988): 852.
205 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 192.

Taking into consideration Celie's curse, Albert finds himself imprisoned by his own evil, exactly like Sofia aptly comments: “meanness kills” him. [206] However, *The Color Purple* is a story of transformation, and even though the true core of the novel is represented by the female characters, Walker does not forget and does not doom the men either. In the novel, the men, especially Albert, are offered the opportunity to change. The breaking point of Albert's transformation appears at the moment when he returns all Nettie's letters to Celie, by this gesture, he releases from his prison and starts to improve. Bell Hooks claims that Albert “moves from male oppressor to enlightened being, willingly surrendering his attachment to the phallocentric social order reinforced by the sexual oppression of women.”[207] After his loss of superior male power, Albert is forced to change completely. Celie cannot even believe it when Sofia describes that Mr._____ works hard in the field, and “clean[s] that house just like a woman.”[208] Nevertheless, Celie's disbelief combines with distrust based on her marriage experience, and she hesitates to reciprocate his friendly behavior.

Celie does manage to break free from all men, her stepfather dies, she leaves Mr._____, and finds a new dimension of spirituality by worshiping loving and tolerant God. However, Celie's great transformation and her power in the end lies in her decision to overcome the past oppression. Just toward the end of the novel, with the blooming friendship they develop, and with Celie gaining independence, strength and self-confidence, she starts to call Mr._____ by his name Albert. At last, after all they have gone through, Celie and Albert become good friends and keep each other company joined together by their mutual love for Shug who has been an inseparable member of this triangle from the very beginning. Bell Hooks argues that Shug serves as “the catalyst for [Celie's] resistance to male domination, for her coming to power.”[209] As already suggested above, Shug represents a key figure in Celie's emancipation process and its every aspect. Most importantly, it is thanks to Shug that Celie finds the strength in her to leave her prison.

In my opinion, the ultimate prove of Celie's liberation appears at the final scene when Celie, Nettie and the children finally reunite, and Celie introduces her

206 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 199.
207 Hooks, “Writing the Subject,” 460.
208 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 197.
209 Hooks, “Writing the Subject,” 456.

companions: “This Shug and Albert, […] my peoples.”[210] By identifying Shug and Albert as her closest people, Celie reaches the final level of her liberation. Christopher S. Lewis comments that Albert as “the failed patriarch becomes the symbol of successful, feminist heterosexual masculinity and the shameless black same-sex desiring woman becomes emblematic of successful black female sexual articulation.”[211]

In conclusion, I would like to mention Barbara Smith's review of *The Color Purple*, in which she claims that a work can, and should be considered extraordinary if, firstly “it does something new,” and secondly, if it indicates “multiplicity of approaches one can take to understanding it.”[212] Taking these two factors into consideration, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* definitely should be labeled extraordinary. As I hope to have proved in my thesis, *The Color Purple* does introduce several novelties and countless approaches to contemplate.

Among all the approaches Smith points out, such as symbolism, mythic qualities, philosophical stance, and even humor, I have considered the significance of epistolary form of the novel, sexism and racism, the influence of African legacy, the role of physical beauty, motherhood, and above all the power of female-bonding. The uniqueness of *The Color Purple*, according to Barbara Smith, resides in its depiction of sexual and emotional oppression, and most importantly in explicitly portraying black lesbian relationship inside a traditional patriarchal black community.[213]

5.2 *Corregidora*

Ursa Corregidora's greatest struggle is recognition of her own (sexual) identity, and therefore liberation, firstly from the past and her maternal oppression symbolized by the childbearing imperative; and secondly, from her present slave-like marriages with Mutt, and Tadpole, who by emulating old man Corregidora's violent behavior, place Ursa into a subordinate position of a sexual object. Finally, Ursa realizes the possibility to reach freedom on both these levels, namely by means of music, and by acknowledging her sexual female power.

The Corregidora women base their lives upon an instant repetition of history,

210 Walker, *The Color Purple*, 253.
211 Lewis, “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness,” 167.
212 Smith, “Sexual Oppression Unmasked,” 170.
213 Smith, “Sexual Oppression Unmasked,” 170.

therefore, similarly to the way old man Corregidora treated Great Gram and Gram and owned their bodies, Mutt, and later also Tadpole behave as owners of Ursa's body. As already suggested in the previous chapter, these corresponding patterns of behavior create a precise parallel between Ursa's present and past.

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy points out that every one one of her maternal ancestors teaches Ursa a different piece of knowledge, Great Gram emphasizes the importance of “leaving evidence,” and “bearing witness” as a family ritual and legacy which should never be forgotten. Thanks to her Gram, Ursa recognizes that “bearing witness” might cause damage to her soul and mind, and therefore, it is crucial to protect her emotional health. The wisdom from her Gram helps Ursa in terms of liberation on two levels, firstly, she learns that although “leaving evidence” can be passed from one generation to another the true feelings linked to the events themselves cannot be transformed onto another person. Secondly, realizing this fact, and rethinking her supposed hate for old Corregidora leads Ursa to reconciliation with Mutt. And finally, Mama's experience shows Ursa how this family imperative can threaten the listener personal life and relationships. Having learned all this, Ursa now needs to find her own way of developing her personality based on the experiences she acquires from her ancestors but simultaneously, in order not be entirely consumed by the family history, she has to discover a balance between passing on the story of Corregidora's crimes and speaking up in her own voice.

Ursa's liberation from the past and from the maternal imperative originates from Ursa's visit and first sincere conversation with her Mama whose relationship has been defined and consequently destroyed by the Corregidora legacy. Deborah Horvitz suggests that Ursa needs to learn the truth about her mother's life and to what extent it was influenced by her foremothers' order to “make generations.” Horvitz explains:

> Jones makes the point that the evolution of a woman's sexuality is predicted upon (re)union with maternal world, mimicking psychological thought that adult sexual identity requires an intersubjective relationship with the mother or maternal figure.[214]

214 Horvitz, “Sadism Demands a Story,” 252.

Mama reveals to Ursa that she is unable to feel any sexual desire or pleasure, and as she tells the story about her relationship with Ursa's father, Martin, she admits she "wasn't looking for no man, cause [she] didn't feel like no woman."[215] However, she still was driven by the obligation to "make generations," and she says to Ursa: "it was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you'd be a girl."[216] Mama's mind is simply set onto one goal, that is to conceive a baby but still keep the hatred for all men, and having her mind and feelings shaped by her foremothers, she rejects Martin's love after becoming pregnant. And although, they do get married, she drives him away with her distrust, hateful attitude, and most importantly sexual aversion. She reveals to Ursa: "I hadn't even given myself time to feel anything else before I pushed him out."[217] For Mama, sexual pleasure would signify a denial of her Corregidora identity, for that reason she does not allow herself to feel any sexual desire or loving emotions toward Martin.

Sadly, Ursa repeats her mother's mistakes and with the same behavior she destroys her own relationships. Horvitz argues that "both women's lack of desire drives men to hate them, but with the frightening realization that her life shadows her mother's, Ursa claims the presence of her own sexuality by reclaiming the past."[218] In other words, hearing Mama's love story predestined to a tragic end because of the impact of the maternal imperative, empowers Ursa to fight for her own life and voice.

Ursa's liberation results from her music. Because of the loss of her womb, and the ability to "make generations," she needs to create her own way of expressing herself and a new form of passing on the evidence. And she finds all that in her music. Sirene Harb argues that "the blues constitute a form of artistic self-expression catalyzing Ursa's psychological healing."[219] In other words, Ursa, obligated to leave evidence, devotes her voice to singing, and in her music, she combines the family narrative, and her own identity. After her injury, Ursa's voice becomes a mirror of her soul, and Cat tells her that "before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now."[220] It is almost as if Ursa's voice itself was speaking of her suffering and pain, and

215 Jones, *Corregidora*, 115.
216 Jones, *Corregidora*, 114.
217 Jones, *Corregidora*, 117.
218 Horvitz, "Sadism Demands a Story," 253.
219 Harb, "Memory, History, and Self-Reconstruction," 125.
220 Jones, *Corregidora*, 44.

also of old Corregidora's crimes. Ursa's family, however, does not approve of blues signing as they refer to it as "devil's music." But Ursa does not give up her only means of self-expression, and tries to explain that she passes the evidence through blues. Ursa promises that she will sing about "'*the Portuguese who bought slaves* [and] *paid attention only to the genitals,'*" she argues that "*when it's time to give witness [she]'ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee*."[221]

Stephanie Li suggests that blues represents Ursa's form of resistance and, therefore provides her with strength to acknowledge her value as a women. Li explains that Ursa "engages in an artistic sought to foster female subjectivity and liberate sexual desire."[222] Nevertheless, the significance of Ursa's music does not reside only in its content as she passes on the evidence of Corregidora's history of abuse, but Ursa's voice itself is an important part of her development. Max Monroe, the owner of the club named the Spider where Ursa performs, describes her voice as "strong and hard but gentle underneath. The kind of voice that can hurt you […] and make you still want to listen."[223] Ursa's voice, thus symbolizes, firstly, her instrument through which she creates a mutual sympathy between her audience and herself, and so bonds with them via shared misery and pain. And secondly, it equates the duality of gentleness and pain which for Ursa, deeply connects not only within her music, but also within her sexual relationships. This strong relation of desire and pain found in Ursa's music leads directly to the second level of her liberation, providing an imaginary bridge between Ursa's past and present.

Second aspect of Ursa's liberation, however strongly interconnected with her maternal past, is represented by her sexual identity and her present relationships. In the second half of the novel, Ursa comments: *"A man always says I want to fuck, a woman always has to say I want to get fucked."*[224] This thought basically summarizes Ursa's view of sex and sexual desire; that is a man is always the one actively and dominantly demanding sexual intercourse, and a woman always takes the position of a passive victim, and object of male sexual desire.

Another dualism linked to Ursa's, and all Corregidoras' sexual identity, is the relation

221 Jones, *Corregidora*, 54
222 Stephanie Li, "Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*," *Callaloo* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 138.
223 Jones, *Corregidora,* 96.
224 Jones, *Corregidora*, 89.

between physical pain and sexual pleasure which according to Ursa complement as "two humps on the same camel."[225] The connection between pain and desire, love and hatred represents a great theme in *Corregidora,* although the Corregidora women deny the answer. Ursa's mother even claims that Great Gram and Gram hated Martin because as the only one he "had the nerve to ask them 'how much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love.'"[226] After years of "leaving evidence" of Corregidora's sexual oppression, Great Gram and Gram absolutely refuse the ambiguity of feelings for old Corregidora and his sexual practices on them, as something they might have enjoyed, just as Martin suggests by his question.

Similarly to the intermingled feelings of love and hate, Ursa struggles to uncover the secret of the mixture of sexual desire and pain which always takes her back to the long unaswered question: "What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?"[227] According to Horvitz, "the answer is that she can erotizice pain."[228] This vicious circle of mixed feelings of pleasure and pain consequently leads back to the Ursa's search for relationships built on a master-slave principle from which she longs to break free. Therefore, Ursa's liberation resides in her acquired ability to reverse positions within the victim-oppressor dyad, realizing that "literally" holding man's genitals endows her with the power of a master, however, needless to say that this shift does not ensure a happy, balanced relationship.

Ursa's key to liberation always directs her back to the mystical question she asks herself for years. This symbolic act of repeating her ancestral history leads Ursa into an epiphanic moment of self-recognition, and recognition of her sexual power. Just as Ursa performs fellatio on Mutt, she comes to reveal the family secret of what it was that Great Gram did to old Corregidora that forced her to flee from Brazil leaving her daughter behind. Ursa realizes that "it had to be sexual; a moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlesssness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin," in this moment of absolute sexual power she tells Mutt: "I could kill you."[229]

225 Jones, *Corregidora*, 102.
226 Jones, *Corregidora*, 131.
227 Jones, *Corregidora*, 184.
228 Horvitz, "Sadism Demands a Story," 249.s
229 Jones, *Corregidora*, 184.

"In this moment they both recognize that union can only be achieved when the will to power and control are set aside."[230] Fulani continues to explain that in this scene, Ursa recognizes her power over Mutt which originates from her sexuality, as she can choose to either hurt him or sexually please him. An important part of Ursa's liberation also lies in Mutt's own recognition of her sexual dominance over him, although, in the end, Ursa decides to please him. However, Mutt's acknowledgment of his passive and powerless position of this moment leads them both toward a mutual respect, and reunion.

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you," he said.
"Then you don't want me."
"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you."
"Then you don't want me."
He shook me till I fell against him crying.
"I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither," I said.
He held me tight.[231]

Horvitz, too, views this scene as absolutely crucial in the process of Ursa's emancipation: "Aware of the fact that she can sexually control a man through sadomasochism, Ursa identifies herself as a Corregidora woman, at the same time, her choice not to exploit that power is her declaration of independence from her 'mothers.'"[232]

In my opinion, Ursa's liberation ultimately resides in her realization and subsequent acceptance of her own identity and her identity as Corregidora. However, the theorists seem to agree on an open-ending of the novel, they do not share a clear opinion of how to read the final scene. As already indicated by Horvitz, Ursa "recognize[s] her wish for violent revenge, but by uncovering this insight during sex, she links erotic pleasure with the violence in herself which enables her, finally, to reclaim her own desire."[233] Ursa confirms her dominant sexual position by acknowledging that her

230 Fulani, "Gender, Conflict, and Community,"13.
231 Jones, *Corregidora*, 185.
232 Horvitz, "Sadism Demands a Story," 257.
233 Horvitz, "Sadism Demands a Story," 259.

sexual desire stems from her wish for revenge. Therefore, Ursa can only discover her true self by accepting the fact that her sexuality and anger are two inseparable instances.

Contrarily, Goldberg claims that Ursa “is still unable to voice her desire,” because although, she does initiates oral sex with Mutt, she hesitates to demand the same sexual pleasure for herself.[234] Stephanie Li joins in with a completely different theory that by means of fellatio, Ursa indicates her intention to communicate with Mutt. Li says that “Ursa's opening gesture of sexual initiative implies desire, even if she does not achieve orgasm,” therefore, sexual pleasure is not the reason for Ursa's reunion with Mutt, but it is his role as her witness and listener that brings Ursa back to his arms.[235]

In spite all these contradictory theories, I believe that Ursa reaches liberation through music which helps her find the equilibrium between the Corregidora legacy and responsibility to “leave evidence,” and her own way of self-determination. In terms of sexuality, the process of Ursa's emancipation seems rather complex and hard to define. Nevertheless, I would conclude that Ursa's key to her sexuality resides in her ability to reverse the established male-dominated sexual hierarchy once she comes to realize her female power she acquires during sex.

5.3 *The Bluest Eye*

Pecola's destiny is the most tragic out of the four protagonists, and although this chapter is dedicated to the liberation from prejudices, Pecola stands among those who never reach it. Unfortunately, Pecola becomes a victim of sexual and emotional abuse, and her own desire for white beauty, and she reminds a victim until the end. Similarly to Celie and *The Color Purple*, in *The Bluest Eye*, life challenges Pecola on three different but interconnected levels; physical beauty, sexuality, and lastly mental health, sadly, she looses the battle in every one of these aspects. According to Malin LaVon Walther, in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison distinguishes two different, but closely linked types of gaze, logically marked as male and female gaze. I would now like to elaborate Walther's theory considering Pecola's destruction in terms of the two firstly mentioned

234 Goldberg, “Living the Legacy,” 468.
235 Li, “Love and the Trauma of Resistance,” 146.

aspects, physical beauty and sexuality, based on the causality of female and male gaze.

Walther claims that in *The Bluest Eye* "women look at other women to determine social status and to make comparisons to themselves."[236] The mutual rivalry and grudge widely applies among all the female characters; from Pauline measuring her appearance according to the Hollywood stars, Maureen and Geraldine rejecting black girls as "dirty and loud niggers," to Claudia's absolute aversion when it comes to white dolls or any living girl approaching the white ideals of beauty.

I already mentioned the great significance of the concept of physical beauty in *The Bluest Eye.* Now I would like to focus further on on this issue from two different perspectives. There is a dual causality of Pecola's ugliness; firstly, it causes Pecola's self-hatred, and secondly, it encourages Pecola's marginal position within the community. Considering these two aspects of her appearance, Pecola forms a very strong attachment to the idea of having blue eyes which would provide a reason for others to love and admire her. And so Pecola is obsessed with blue eyes because she longs to have at least something beautiful, she is convinced, that this feature of physical beauty will bring her love, respect of others, and a reason to be acknowledged: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights – if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different."[237] Pecola believes that her ugliness is the essence of her being and her identity, and therefore she does not deserve better treatment. I am convinced, however, that Pecola's misery stems from this family stigma and the fact that Pecola's closest people constantly reassure her of her bad looks.

Nevertheless, creating a feeling of pity for Pecola is not Morrison's goal. In the afterword of the novel, Morrison herself explains that "centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her."[238] To put it differently, Morrison's intention is to provoke anger caused by Pecola's passivity and submissive attitude. I would compare this kind of reaction Morrison calls for in *The Bluest Eye*, to Trudier Harris' annoyed comment mentioned above in connection to *The Color Purple:* "What sane

236 Walther, "Out of Sight,"779.
237 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 34.
238 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 168.

black woman […] would sit around and take that crock of shit from all those folks?"[239] Similarly to Pecola, Celie suffers physical and emotional abuse from childhood, they are both frequently reminded of their ugliness, yet they differ in their will to fight. Of course, it takes decades and Shug Avery's guidance for Celie to accumulate the courage to revolt, but finally she succeeds. Pecola succumbs to her misery without the slightest sign of rebellion or even anger.

Morrison, therefore projects her anger with Pecola's submission into Claudia, the only character who manages to liberate herself from the set patriarchal conventions. Claudia represents the true rebel, especially in terms of the female's motherhood predetermination as the symbol of gender prejudice, and the white concept of physical beauty, both of which are reflected by her attitude towards baby dolls:

> I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was interested only in humans my own age and size, and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother.[240]

Regardless Claudia's age, I view her reaction as a very mature one as she rejects being assigned the role of mother, and thus being deprived of the possibility to make the decision herself. Claudia's interest in playing with children her "own age and size" seems more than logical.

As I believe, Claudia's strength resides in her adult-like realization and acceptance of her own identity and appearance. Despite all the events, just as Pecola's first menstruation, which are completely new and even terrifying for the little girls, Claudia is fully aware of her looks and social status, as she wonders: "the *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not *us*."[241] Yet, Claudia radically refuses to adopt Pecola's internalization with the white beauty standards. To this matter, Jerome Bump points out one scene when Maureen makes fun of Pecola for seeing her father naked. Pecola, however, is unable to defend herself, and so Claudia steps in with her fury and ends up accidentally hitting Pecola in her face, later on Claudia admits: "Her pain

239 Harris, "On The Color Purple," 155.
240 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 13.
241 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 58.

antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets."[242] Bump argues that "even Claudia ended up focusing her shame-driven anger on the scapegoat, Pecola."[243] Claudia spurns Pecola's passivity and inability to stand for herself.

As already noted in the previous chapter, the concept of beauty is strongly connected to sexual attractiveness. Continuing Walther's theory and the matter of male gaze associated with sexuality, she argues that "Morrison connects the male gaze with sexual desire and objectification of women."[244] In other words, men look at women with an only intention, that is to initiate or coerce them into sex. Similarly to the validity of the female gaze theory and its accurate applicability to all woman characters, the sexual lust related to the male gaze just as much precisely applies to all man characters, including Mr. Henry's passion for prostitutes as well as for Frieda, Soaphead Church and his perverted desire for little girls, not forgetting Cholly and Pecola's rape.

The rape scene has already been discussed in detail, yet the consequences are crucial within the process of Pecola's devastation. As dreadful as the act is in its nature, Bump claims that most theorists agree that it serves as the emotional climax of the novel.[245] Sadly for Pecola, this violent sexual initiation moves her one step forward to madness. Via the flashback into Cholly's childhood and adolescence, Morrison gradually prepares the ground for the ultimate tragedy. From the beginning, Cholly is depicted as a violent, abusive alcoholic who sets his family house on fire. Consequently, Kokopeli and Lakey define rape as "the end logic of masculine sexuality. Rape is not so much a sexual act as an act violence expressed in a sexual way."[246] According to this theory, Pecola's rape represents only a logic result of Cholly's "dangerously free" spirit and violent nature intensified by drunkenness.

Interestingly, there is one more important aspect to this tragic event; no matter how perverted Cholly's act may seem, the local community shares a simple opinion

242 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 57.
243 Jerome Bump, "Racism and Appearance in *The Bluest Eye*: A Template for an Ethical Emotive Criticism," *College Literature* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 151.
244 Walther, "Out of Sight,"779.
245 Bump, "Racism and Appearance," 153.
246 Kokopeli, Lakey, "More Power than We Want," 451.

that “Cholly loved her. [...] sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her.”[247] Cholly raping Pecola is viewed as the only proof of love and desire Pecola has ever been given, despite the fact that “his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death.”[248] The resulting opinion of the entire neighborhood clearly demonstrates that Pecola's ugliness ultimately caused a complete rejection of her persona, and her rape only provided another reason to lynch her.

The third suggested aspect of Pecola's destruction is the failure of her mental health. However, I would suggest that to some extent Pecola's insanity represents a certain level of liberation. First of all, the madness sets her free from the past and the tragic events she has experienced, the rape, consequent pregnancy, and the death of her baby. Secondly, the insanity at last brings Pecola the desired blue eyes and beauty, although both imaginary, and she dedicates the rest of her sad life to watching her “really, truly, bluely nice eyes,”[249] happy in her belief that people do not look at her because they are jealous of her eyes.

> All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous.[250]

One of the most important features of Pecola's victimization is her assigned position of the community's scapegoat. In the end, Pecola's devastation heals the community's complexes, smooths their unhappiness, and covers their imperfections. Bump reminds that Pecola's fear of ugliness represents one of the most common fears among all people, that is “fear of being rejected because of our appearance,” and so Pecola suffers the consequences of the general “assumption that the outside of a person reflects the inside,”[251] and so carries the burden of the entire community.

247 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 163.
248 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 163.
249 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 153.
250 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 163.
251 Bump, “Racism and Appearance,” 154-155.

Yet, at least through the character of Claudia, Morrison attacks two stereotypes at once; white beauty as the established ideal, and motherhood as the woman's designated role and social position. Claudia's hatred and annoyance with the baby dolls and the white girls is simply revolutionary.

5.4 *Sula*

In contrast to the other three protagonists, Sula is free from the very beginning, although, I am strongly convinced that Sula's identity and her toughness is shaped by two tragic events she cannot influence. The initial cut into Sula's heart and soul is the discovery of her mother's true feelings for her. Hearing that the person, who is supposed to love her the most – her mother – does not actually like her, turns Sula's heart nearly into a stone.

The second moment which closes up Sula's personal development is the death of Chicken Little for which she feels to be responsible, but at the same time, she knows it was an accident. It remains true, however, that none of the two girls has made any effort to save him from drowning, but on the other hand, what child at age of twelve would manage to do so. My intention here is not to make excuses of Sula's later behavior, her treatment of her grandmother Eva, or seducing Nel's husband Jude, however, I do see the origin of Sula' s self-centered, and selfish attitude in those two childhood events which taught her there is nobody and nothing to rely on, not her friends, not her closest family, not even herself, just as Morrison tells us:

> As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life – ever since her mother's remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either.[252]

252 Morrison, *Sula*, 118-119.

Undoubtedly, Sula is full of contradictions, and challenges all the established definitions of female behavior. Hortense Spillers perfectly summarizes Sula's extraordinary characteristics as follows:

> The black woman in her characterization exists for the race, in its behalf, and in maternal relationship to its profoundest needs and wishes. Sula, on the other hand, lives for Sula and has no wish to "mother" anyone, let alone the black race in some symbolic concession to a collective need.[253]

As suggested by Spillers' quote, Sula rejects every single aspect of black womanhood, just as devotion to family and community, she completely denies existence of her maternal instinct, and ruthlessly enforces her sexual freedom. Sula's absolute refusal of these set conventions designates her as an "artist with no art form," and thus makes her dangerous.[254]

One of the aspects of Sula's revolutionary behavior is her choice not to become mother. Taking into consideration the family environment, experiencing maternal rejection and witnessing her mother's death, Sula grows up into a cynical selfish woman. When Sula returns to Medallion after ten years, Eva immediately confronts her and her reckless way of living. Eva encourages Sula to settle down and start a family, but Sula resolutely declares that she does not want to make somebody else, but she wants to make herself.[255]

Apart from her negative attitude towards motherhood, Sula breaks the taboo also in the field of relationships and sexual behavior. Unlike Celie, Ursa, and Pecola, Sula's sexual life is never controlled by male dominance. Spiller explains that "we do not see Sula in relationship to an "oppressor," a "whitey," a male, a dominant and dominating being outside the self. […] Whatever Sula has become, whatever is, is a matter of her own choices, often ill-formed and ill- informed. Even her loneliness […] is her own."[256] Just as Sula refuses to become a mother because she is convinced it would be in contradiction with her nature, she denies the possibility of being imprisoned in

253 Hortense J. Spillers, "A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 294.
254 Morrison, *Sula*, 121.
255 Morrison, *Sula*, 92.
256 Spillers, "A Hateful Passion," 296.

marriage. Sula's driving force resides in her lack of morality and selfishness which in the end leads her to the loss of best friend.

As already discussed, regarding the matter of race and gender, Sula, contrarily to Nel, does not succumb to social conventions such as motherhood and/or marriage. With connection to prejudices, it is crucial to recall that Nel and Sula "each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be."[257] Already in an early age, Sula and Nel realize their subordinate position within the community which is determined by their sex and color of their skin. However, as demonstrated in my thesis, Sula decides to go against the status quo, regardless the price she pays for her liberation; loneliness and hatred of others, including Nel. I would argue that despite the above mentioned prediction that as a black woman, she is sentenced to fail, Sula manages to live her life in a way that is only assigned to men. For such inappropriate behavior, the community rewards Sula with contempt and open criticism.

In their hatred toward Sula, I see a great portion of jealousy. Although, everybody in the community condemns Sula's frivolous way of living, I think, they envy her courage to live according to her own rules and desires, which is something they are themselves scared to do, and thus never even dare to try. So they find comfort in spurning Sula and her behavior, because it is easier than making a change. In the end, after Sula's death, she serves as the community scapegoat, exactly like Pecola, regardless Sula's strength, real or pretended. Renita Weems explains that "through Sula's death, Morrison points out that without such women in the neighborhood there is no one against whom 'upright' women can measure their righteousness."[258] Via the community's disapproval of Sula's unacceptable behavior they claim themselves the guardians of morality welcoming her death as the death of evil. Nevertheless, what nobody in the community knows is that Sula's death predicts also the ultimate end of the neighborhood, as suggested at the opening part of the novel.

At last, I would like to mention Sula and Nel's last conversation when Nel visits Sula

257 Morrison, *Sula*, 52.
258 Renita Weems, "'Artists Without Art Form': A Look at One Black Woman's World of Unrevered Black Women," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Woman of Color Press, 1983), 99.

in the hospital in search for answers from the past, and they exchange last words of honesty. Nel, too, shows her disagreement with Sula's way of life, and she bursts out: “You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't.”[259] Evidently, Nel condemns Sula for being herself, and as everybody else, for living the life they have no courage to live, moreover she denies Sula's approach to life by using insults based on racial and sexist stereotypes.

The final part of Sula's liberation occurs after her death by means of Nel's realization that “all that time, [she incorrectly] thought [she] was missing Jude.”[260] In this sudden moment of agony, Nel understands that Sula formed an important part of her personality, they grew up together, they witnessed death together, they “were two throats and one eye.”[261] According to Spiller, Nel comes to finally see that it was not really her unfaithful husband that she missed, “but her alter ego passionately embodied in the other woman”[262] I believe that although Nel never actually forgave Sula that she seduced her husband, Nel's acknowledgment that Sula was really her other half closes the process of Sula's liberation.

259 Morrison, *Sula,* 142.
260 Morrison, *Sula,* 174.
261 Morrison, *Sula,* 147.
262 Spillers, “A Hateful Passion,” 312.

6 Conclusion

In my thesis I have focused on four significant novels by three African-American female writers, namely Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, and *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. My intention was to analyze, compare, and define the most important aspects of the protagonists' process of liberation from coercive obedience, namely the importance of voice and silence with respect to the type of narrative, the role of motherhood and the influence of family legacy, the concept of beauty and its close connection to sexuality which ultimately defines the position of females within the patriarchal society, and finally I have dedicated the last chapter to the liberation from prejudices, or in case of *The Bluest Eye*, to the complete failure and devastation of Pecola's identity.

To conclude the chapter focusing on the matter of voice and silence, I would like to stray from the four analyzed novels and mention Mary Helen Washington's foreword to Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, one of the key works of black feminist fiction. Washington recalls Alice Walker's revolutionary remark that "women did not have to speak when men thought they should, that they would choose when and where they wish to speak because while many women had found their own voices, they also knew when it was better not to use it."[263] The true meaning of these words refers to the woman's freedom not only to have her own voice, but to her right not to use it if she desires to do so. To this matter, I would like to conclude, apart from Sula, who is free in her very nature, Celie, Ursa and Pecola are frequently silenced from the outside, not from their own convictions. However, Celie and Ursa finally push through and gain their voice, Celie recovers her womanhood and self-confidence thanks to love and guidance of Shug Avery, Ursa then by means of music. At last, excluding Pecola, Celie, Ursa, and Sula win absolute control over their voices.

Motherhood is an extremely important aspect of the protagonists' process of development and liberation, because the mother-daughter relationship shapes the girl's personality from the childhood and so provides the daughter with a female model. Needless to say that the novels' mothers are portrayed as tough, often cruel women whose violent behavior may later on be adopted by their daughters, as it

263 Mary Helen Washington, foreword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neal Hurston (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), xiv.

happens to Sula, and Ursa to some extent. In overall conclusion, I would like to point out one passage from Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which exactly captures Morrison's conception of womanhood and motherhood:

> Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, "Do this."White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down." The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image. They ran the houses of white people, and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. […] They were tired enough to look forward to death, disinterested enough to accept the idea of pain while ignoring the presence of pain. They were, in fact and at last, free. [264]

This quotation depicts a black woman's everyday reality which builds up a chain of violence and abuse. According to Morrison, black woman's life consists of orders that are again based on the duality of her oppression; gender and race.

The role of women as mothers directly connects to the concept of physical beauty and sexuality which is the key to the answer of the female position in the male society. In her essay "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib," Toni Morrison comments on the position of a black female and the absence of life certainties. Morrison argues that the black woman "had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. […] She was a sexual object in the eyes if men."[265] As suggested by Morrison's quote, and as demonstrated in my work, woman's sexual objectificiation is a feature that appears in all the four novels and greatly defines the protagonists' status. Physical appearance, judged by the white standards of beauty influences to a certain level each of the protagonists, especially Pecola whose

264 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 108.
265 Toni Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib," *New York Times*, August 22, 1971, https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/22/archives/what-the-black-woman-thinks-about-womens-lib-the-black-woman-and.html.

internalization with white looks leads to a complete destruction of her identity. Unlike the commonly shared desire for white beauty in *The Bluest Eye*, in *Sula*, approximation to the white ideals equates with degradation of the black race. In *Corregidora*, the mulatto appearance indicates aggressive sexual behavior dangerous to the community. Generally said, sexual identity is inseparable from self-acceptance, including one's physical appearance, this process of self-realization represents the major aim of all the protagonists.

In the chapter on liberation from prejudices, I seek the aspects and particular moments that guide the protagonists to freedom, although, Celie, Ursa, Sula, and Pecola develop on different levels, they share their dream of independence. Celie reaches liberation on three spheres, religion, sexual oppression, and financial security, all of which are closely guided by her intimate friend and lover, Shug Avery. Celie literary writes her way through her oppression towards liberation, and her identity is thus coined by her letters. She writes out her feelings of pain, and despair, and she also shares her joy and love in her letters. At last, Celie´s correspondence serves as the most sincere witness of her self-development, and the ultimate proof of her liberation accomplishment.

Ursa's emancipation originates from abandoning the family imperative which allows her to focus on her present. She finally breaks free from her slavery-like marriages by realizing the power of female sexuality. Ursa establishes her newly developed identity through blues music which fulfills double function. Firstly, it offers Ursa an alternative to pass the evidence as she is unable to bear children after the hysterectomy. And secondly, it serves her as means of self-expression because she finds her true self in blues music.

Pecola's destiny shows all the sad consequences of poor family conditions, violent parental behavior, and most importantly the fatal influence of white culture in terms of beauty standards. Overall, life fails Pecola in every possible aspect, tragically, I view Pecola's insanity as the only recognizable feature of her liberation, because only through her madness she reaches her wish to be beautiful.

In my opinion, Sula is the utmost complex and contradictory of all the protagonists. Her free spirit and reckless, often even ruthless behavior is shaped by her maternal environment and an accident during which she and Nel cause Chicken Little's death.

Sula learns that she cannot rely on anybody, she exists only for herself. Her selfish nature and rejection of every single patriarchal restriction, including motherhood, marriage and subordinate female position, establishes Sula as the real “New World Woman.”

Alice Walker, Gayl Jones and Toni Morrison doubtlessly belong among the most significant and influential African-American female writers of today. Whether the protagonists reach the liberation or not, the authors' courage to openly write about issues, such as racism, sexism, black female (homo)sexuality and emancipation, strengthens the female readers' sense of freedom, and hope for liberation.

Resumé

Ve své diplomové práci jsem se věnovala detailní analýze čtyř románů významných afroamerických autorek, jmenovitě pak díle Alice Walker *Barva nachu*, z roku 1982, Gayl Jones *Corregidora*, publikované roku 1975, a dvěma románům Toni Morrison *Nejmodřejší oči* z roku 1970 a *Sula* vydaná v roce 1973. Mým cílem bylo důkladně popsat a následně porovnat hlavní hrdinky těchto románů a proces jejich osvobození se od sociálního a sexuálního útlaku. V jednotlivých kapitolách jsem se zaměřila na vybrané aspekty jejich osobního vývoje na cestě k emancipaci. Samozřejmě je třeba mít na paměti, že pouze třem postavám se podaří svobody dosáhnout a oprostit se od společenských stereotypů založených na patriarchálních hodnotách.

V první kapitole se zaměřuji především na význam zvoleného typu narace a s tím související schopnost protagonistky využít sílu svého hlasu k sebeobraně, či sebevyjádření. Předně je důležité uvědomit si dvě příčiny, z jakých jsou Celie, Ursa, Pecola a Sula umlčovány. Tyto příčiny pramení z genderových a rasový důvodů, jinými slovy, patriarchální a stereotypní autority zapovídají vyjádření názoru ženám, a o to důrazněji pak ženám afroamerickým. Tyto čtyři hrdinky, jsou tedy nuceny bojovat nejen jakožto ženy v patriarchální společnosti, ale i jako ženy tmavé pleti v majoritní bělošské společnosti.

Následující kapitola se věnuje konceptu mateřství a důležitosti rodinného odkazu. Na toto téma nahlížím ze dvou různých perspektiv; nejprve se zaměřuji na vztah hlavních hrdinek ke svým rodičům, především pak matkám, které představují ženský model pro své dcery, jež následně kopírují jejich chování a zvyklosti. V souvislosti s mateřstvím samozřejmě nelze opomenout samotné protagonistky jakožto matky, ať už se jimi stanou ne/dobrovolně, v důsledku znásilnění, nebo tuto roli ve své podstatě odmítají.

Klíčovým aspektem čtvrté kapitoly je pojetí fyzické krásy a jeho úzká spojitost se sexualitou. Předně se zabývám mírou, do jaké jsou Celie, Ursa, Pecola a Sula posuzovány na základě jejich vzhledu a sexuální identity. Další neopomenutelnou součástí této kapitoly je téma incestu a sexuálního zneužívání, které v různém rozsahu zasahuje do života všech čtyř hrdinek a hluboce tak ovlivňuje proces jejich sexuálního vývoje. V souvislosti se sexualitou také zmiňuji otázku postavení žen v patriarchální

společnosti, jež je striktně definováno právě sexuální objektivizací žen.

V poslední kapitole shrnuji všechny uvedené aspekty procesu osvobození se, mapuji rozhodující okamžiky osobního vývoje jednotlivých hrdinek. U každé protagonistky je třeba zohlednit různé oblasti, ve kterých dosahují seberealizace a vytoužené svobody. V případě Celie se jedná o svobodu náboženskou, oproštění se od sexuálního útlaku a finanční nezávislost. Ursa nachází vysvobození ve svém hudebním projevu a náhlém uvědomění si své ženské sexuální síly. Pecola je smutným příkladem devastace života dívky, která touží po modrých očích, jakožto symbolu Hollywoodské krásy. V důsledku mylného ztotožnění se s těmito nedosažitelnými ideály a tragické události znásilnění vlastním otcem, Pecola nachází jedinou útěchu v šílenství. Sula, díky své vrozené svobodomyslnosti a nezájmu o společenské konvence naopak představuje naprosto nový typ ženy, svobodné již ve své podstatě.

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Annotation

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Thesis Topic: Writing as a Liberation Process from Coercive Obedience: Aspects of the Protagonists' Development in African-American Female Fiction

Thesis supervisor: prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, Csc.

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This master thesis focuses on four novels (Sula, The Bluest Eye, The Color Purple and Corregidora) by three significant African-American female authors, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gayl Jones. I will deal with several aspects of the process of liberation of each of the protagonists, Sula, Pecola, Celie and Ursa. The aspects in particular are the role of narration, in other words, the importance of the protagonist´s voice, motherhood and the influence of family history on the protagonist´s life, the idea of beauty and how it is connected to sexuality, the position of a black woman in the society, and finally the liberation from prejudices the protagonists have to face.

Anotace

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Téma práce: Psaní jako proces osvobození se od sociálního útlaku: aspekty vývoje hrdinek ve vybraných dílech afroamerických autorek

Vedoucí práce: prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, Csc.

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Klíčová slova: afroamerická feministická literatura, narace, mateřství, genderové stereotypy, sociální útlak, sexuální zneužívání

Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na podrobnou analýzu hlavních hrdinek čtyř románů, konkrétně na Sulu a Nejmodřejší oči od Toni Morrison, Barvu nachu od Alice Walker a Corregidoru od Gayl Jones. Kapitoly budou věnovány jednotlivým aspektům jejich vývoje, konkrétně role narace a význam mlčení, mateřství a odkaz rodiny, koncept krásy a jeho spojitost se sexualitou, postavení afroamerické ženy v patriarchální společnosti a na závěr samotné osvobození se od zavedených stereotypů a sociálního útlaku.